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LOOKING BACK

Four Plays

Reflections on suicide, child abuse, depression and murder

Judith Weinshall Liberman

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Judith Weinshall Liberman

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Judith Weinshall Liberman

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This book is dedicated

to the memory of
my husband, Prof. Robert Liberman
my father, Dr. Abraham Weinshall
my brother, Saul Weinshall

to my family
my son, Dr. David Liberman
my daughter, Dr. Laura Liberman
my grandchildren, Daniel, Nina, Cynthia and Deborah

to Samuel Harps
Artistic Director
of the
Shades Repertory Theater
in Haverstraw, New York, U.S.A.
who was the first to stage any of my plays
(GOOD OLD ABRAHAM)
and did so brilliantly

and
to the Reali School
in Haifa, Israel
for encouraging my quest
for knowledge
for accomplishment
and for excellence

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A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

This book contains four of my plays, all written after I reached my eightieth birthday. Although I spent most of my adult life creating visual art (oils, acrylics, graphics, wall hangings, mixed media, mosaics, ceramics, stone sculptures etc.), I did, over the years, take time out to write. My published books were almost as diverse as my art, since they consisted of a textbook on international law (1955), a children's book (1976), a book about one of my most important series of artworks (2002), and an autobiography (2007). During this period, I wrote several plays, too, but never bothered to send them out.

My interest in playwriting dates back to my teen years in Israel - it was then called "Palestine" - where I was born and grew up. I remember spending a summer, while I was on vacation from high school, translating Arthur Koestler's newly published drama, TWILIGHT BAR, from English into Hebrew. Looking back, I cannot remember whether I spent all that time working on the translation because the play was particularly meaningful to me or because Arthur Koestler was a close friend of my parents' and I was eager to ingratiate myself to him. Since Mr. Koestler never learned Hebrew, however, I did not bother to show him my translation but only let him know that I was working on it.

I wrote my first play when I was in college in America in the late 1940s. The play was called VICTORY SONG and questioned the existence of justice either in this world or in the hereafter. During the ensuing few decades, several other plays followed. I took courses in playwriting at Harvard Extension, read books on playwriting, and joined a playwrights group. I also enjoyed reading and seeing plays.

My husband's interest in playwriting served to encourage me further, so it is not surprising that after he passed away in 1986, I stopped writing plays and immersed myself almost completely in visual art, creating several series of artworks through which I explored the Holocaust and other manifestations of the human condition.

It was not until I reached my eightieth birthday and my daughter, Dr. Laura Liberman, aware of my interest in playwriting, treated me to an excellent playwriting course on the internet, that the spark of playwriting was rekindled in me. By then I was living in a retirement community, with little space for creating visual art but plenty of time for creative work, so playwriting was the obvious activity for me to pursue.

The first play I wrote at this late stage of my life was EMPATHY. The play was inspired by an experience I had lived through some thirty years before, when my husband, Robert Liberman, who was a professor of law at Boston University and an excellent pianist, suffered a stroke at age 52, which rendered him unable to play the piano. Since playing the piano was vital to him, his loss of the ability to play plunged him into a severe depression and suicidal thoughts. Although I spoke about that experience in my autobiography, MY LIFE INTO ART, I felt that by making the experience the subject of a play, I could explore it in greater depth. Having changed the various personalities involved, I created characters who presented arguments from various points of view (medical, religious, legal, ethical, psychological, emotional) against the protagonist's suicidal plans, thus allowing me to delve into the effect of incapacity and depression not only on the direct victim but also on others.

The religious arguments against suicide brought forth by one of the characters in EMPATHY made me reflect upon Abraham the Patriarch, who, like the main character in EMPATHY, was "tested." Before too long, I found myself reading and rereading the story of Abraham as told in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Since I grew up in Haifa, Israel, and attended the Reali School, where the Old Testament was an important part of our curriculum, I became acquainted with the story of Abraham when I was still in elementary school. The emphasis in our Bible classes at the Reali School was on the historical and literary aspects of the stories we read, rather than on their religious implications. What I took away from the biblical story about Abraham was that he was a man whose faith in God was so profound that he was willing to give up his two beloved sons if that was what God demanded of him.

Although at the time I did not question Abraham's obedience to God, I felt compassion, even as a young girl, for Abraham's two sons: Ishmael, whom, following God's word, Abraham banished to the desert; and Isaac, whom Abraham was willing to sacrifice, seemingly without hesitation, as a burnt offering to God.

I was in my twenties when, with the advent of motherhood, I first began to seriously reflect upon both the moral soundness of Abraham's behavior and the patriarch's veneration in history. From the suicides of ancient Masada through the martyrdoms of the Middle Ages and all the way to more recent sacrifices made in war by fathers and mothers of their sons and daughters, Abraham's binding of Isaac has served as an ideal worthy of emulation. Over the years, this admiration for Abraham increasingly appeared to me to be unjustifiable, so that when I sat down to write GOOD OLD ABRAHAM, my doubts about the patriarch and his adulation were the result of decades of reflection.

GOOD OLD ABRAHAM questions the rationality and morality of Abraham's behavior and his suitability for the positive symbolic role accorded to him by history. This questioning is done within the framework of father-son Bible study sessions, where the son, Joshua, an American teenager who is the play's main character, increasingly gains interest in the Abraham saga and, with mounting self-confidence and insight, dares to question old "truths." Needless to say, the implications of the play go far beyond the bounds of the story of Abraham. They extend to "truths" born in other times and places, "truths" which are still held, and even fought and died for, and which, having remained hitherto unquestioned, may need a Joshua to probe their worth.

My play MICHAL came next. It was inspired by the biblical story of Michal, daughter of King Saul, ancient Israel's first king, as told in two books of the Old Testament, Samuel I and Samuel II. As with the story of Abraham, I became familiar with Michal's story while I was still in elementary school. Although when we studied the Samuel books I was focused on the male characters in the story about the House of Saul, I did, even then, feel compassion for Michal, who lost her father, King Saul, and three of her brothers, in the war of Israel against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. This kernel of empathy for Michal was reawakened in me years later, when my only brother, whose name happened to be "Saul," was killed in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, so that, when I settled down to being a full time playwright, the story of Michal, tucked away deep in my memory, naturally suggested itself to me. In this play I portray Michal as a tragic figure caught up in forces beyond her control.

Last but not least came SISERA'S MOTHER, a play inspired by the story of Deborah as told in chapters 4-5 of the Book of Judges. Again, I studied the story of Deborah, the biblical

leader, judge and prophetess, when I was still in elementary school. Because our teachers at the Reali School presented the Old Testament as a source of knowledge about history and literature, rather than as a religious document, I paid particular attention to the characters in the stories we studied. In the chapters on Deborah, I made note of the two main characters, i.e., the judge-prophetess herself, who was the leader of Israel during its pre-monarchic period, and Barak, whom Deborah summoned to command the nation's forces in a war against the Canaanites.

At the time, I evaluated these two, as well as the other characters in the story of Deborah, by their stance vis-à-vis Israel. This was easy not only because it was the patriotic thing to do but also because the Canaanites had oppressed Israel for twenty years and it seemed to me that oppression should not be suffered by any nation. Therefore, when we read about Sisera, the Canaanites' military commander, and his mother, who awaited her son's return from battle, I felt no sympathy for either one of them when I learned that Yael, seemingly harboring pro-Israelite sentiments although not herself an Israelite, invited Sisera into her tent and played the kind hostess, only to kill him after he fell asleep. I agreed wholeheartedly with Deborah when she said, ***"Blessed above women shall Yael be..."***

Over the years, the balance of my sympathy shifted from Yael, the war heroine, to Sisera's mother. Whether because I lost my only brother in war and have known the pain endured by a family that lost a loved one, or because of increased maturity, I eventually saw Sisera's mother neither as an "enemy" nor as an evil woman, as the biblical tale implies and as many commentators have suggested, but rather as a victim of man's inhumanity to man. Therefore, when I wrote SISERA'S MOTHER, I portrayed the Canaanite

commander's mother, vainly awaiting the return of her beloved son from battle, as a woman worthy not of derision but of compassion. As in my other plays, the implications of SISERA'S MOTHER extend beyond the confines of the drama.

Although three of the plays included in this collection were inspired by biblical stories, I have taken the liberty of bestowing my own interpretation upon the original tales.

Judith Weinshall Liberman

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EMPATHY

A one act play

CHARACTERS

JACOB A youthful looking man in his early fifties, a performing pianist and a piano teacher at a local college, now on medical leave because of a recent stroke.

ESTHER JACOB'S wife, an attractive woman in her late forties, a law professor at a local university, now on leave so she can take care of JACOB.

BEN JACOB'S and ESTHER'S 23 year old son, a second year law school student.

BECKY JACOB'S and ESTHER'S 19 year old daughter, a college student majoring in art.

ALAN A doctor in his early fifties, a childhood friend of JACOB'S. With appropriate makeup/ costume, this character can perhaps be played by the same actor as BEN.

MAYA The ghost of JACOB'S deceased mother, an old woman. She speaks directly to the audience. The other characters are not aware of her presence and cannot hear her, although she may have the power to plant thoughts in one or more of the other characters. Whenever MAYA speaks, she appears in the foreground at stage left with a drape behind her and is brightly lit by a spotlight. The spotlight disappears when she stops speaking.

TIME AND PLACE

The living room of a suburban house in Massachusetts, U.S.A.
The whole action takes place on a single day in the 1980s.

The curtain rises to reveal a dimly lit living room. There is an exterior door at stage left and an interior door at stage right. The room is sparsely furnished. There is a cushioned sofa in the center against the back wall, with a coffee table in front of it. A small desk stands near the exterior door and there is a grand piano toward the opposite end of the room at stage right. The piano, with its lid propped up, dominates the room. The piano stool has been pushed aside toward the wall. There is a tall bookcase full of sheet music against the wall next to the piano. A shadowy figure, the ghost of JACOB'S deceased mother, MAYA, is barely visible in the foreground at stage left and is separated from the living room by a drape. MAYA is suddenly illuminated by a bright spotlight. She is wearing an old-fashioned housedress, and her hair is pulled back in an old-fashioned style.

MAYA

(Speaking to the audience.)

Hello there! My name is Maya. Maybe you wouldn't expect me to be here because I've been dead for a long time and you wouldn't expect a dead person to come back. But I had to come. Actually, to tell you the truth, nothing could have kept me away. You see, my only child, my dear son, Jacob, is in serious trouble and needs help. I'm here to help him. Now, I'm sure you realize that as a dead person, my powers are limited. But I'm hoping to at least be able to plant some ideas in my son's head to steer him right, and in the heads of his family and friends so they can help him. And maybe, just maybe, I can even plant some ideas in your heads – yes, you out there in the audience. I think if I tell you about Jacob so you get to know him, you'll want to help him, too. What else would a good Jewish mother do than muster all the help she can get when her child's in trouble?

The spotlight disappears. The overall stage lighting increases gradually to reveal JACOB, seated in a motorized wheelchair

in front of the piano, his dangling left arm clearly visible. He is playing a soft, melancholy tune with his good right hand, then, with considerable effort, lifts his left hand, which falls dead on the piano keys, producing a disharmonious, jarring sound. JACOB stops playing. He stares at his left hand for a long moment, then pushes his wheelchair away from the piano, allowing his left hand to fall off the piano keys, and wheels himself quickly across the room to the desk. There, he picks up the telephone receiver and dials with his good right hand.

JACOB

(Speaking into the receiver.)

Hi, Alan. Jacob. Listen - - now would be a perfect time - - you come over and help me out - - *(Listens.)*

MAYA

As I recall, Jacob and Alan first met at the temple kindergarten. What a nice little boy Alan was! Nice family, too. The father was a doctor, the mother a nurse. Jacob and Alan always played together when they were little.

JACOB

Try to understand - - can't live like this - - *(Listens.)*

MAYA

They went together not just to kindergarten but later to public school. And of course in the afternoon, when public school was out, they went to Hebrew school together. They always had a lot of homework to do, both for public school and for Hebrew school. In those days children had a lot of homework, not like today. Jacob and Alan used to do their homework together, usually at our house, so I could feed them while they were studying. They especially loved those cheese blintzes I used to make.

JACOB

Told you repeatedly - - just can't take it any more - - the pain - - *(Listens.)* - - Not physical pain - - that would be easier - - it's my spirit - - *(Listens.)* - - Could have another stroke tomorrow - - *(Listens.)* - - Don't need to tell you of all people - - no accounting for these things - - they hit you out of a clear blue - - *(Listens.)* - - As you know - - hardly been sick a day in my life - - suddenly this - - *(Listens.)* - - I know I'm depressed - - have reason to be - - in my shoes, who wouldn't - - *(Listens.)*

MAYA

Jacob started piano lessons when he was six years old. I loved listening to songs on the radio and Jacob would sit in my lap and listen and sing with me, and the way he sang, well, I knew right away he was gifted. He had absolute pitch, singing the songs in exactly the right key. So I talked to his father and said, "Irving, you have a musically gifted son. We should get him a piano." His father wasn't too keen on the idea. He wanted Jacob to spend his free time playing sports rather than playing the piano. You see, my husband had this old fashioned idea that a man should do manly things and that playing music wasn't manly. So I had a lot of talking to do, because Jacob's father was a very stubborn man. But he finally agreed that we should get a piano for Jacob. *(Chuckles.)* You know how it is between a husband and a wife. A wife has a way of convincing even the most stubborn husband to do what she wants him to do.

JACOB

Look, Alan - - I know what I'm doing - - *(Listens.)* - - No - - can't adjust - - I'll never adjust - - *(Listens.)*

MAYA

Of course a child had to really love the piano to make time for practicing. I arranged for Jacob's piano lessons to be

on Friday afternoon because there was no Hebrew school on Friday, before the Sabbath. During the rest of the week, between going to public school and then going to Hebrew school and then doing homework, there wasn't much time to do anything else. But Jacob loved the piano so much he still managed to find an hour or two to practice at night, before going to bed. I always sat next to him whenever I could. How I loved listening to him! It was such a joy!

JACOB

Of course I love Esther - - and the kids - - what does that have to do with it - - It's my life I'm talking about - - *(Listens.)* - - Please, Alan - - don't try to talk me out of it - - no use - - *(Listens.)*

MAYA

As you can imagine, Jacob's father was not too keen on the idea of Jacob practicing late into the night. He thought Jacob should go to bed early and get a good night's sleep. But I explained to my husband that a person doesn't just need to have his body nourished by food and rest, he needs to have his spirit nourished, and of course for Jacob that came from playing the piano. *(Chuckles.)* I finally convinced Irving. I already told you, a wife finds a way. That's just the way it is.

JACOB

Listen, Alan - - Now's a perfect time - - bring some stuff for me to take - - an injection might be best - - quick and easy - - sure results - - Esther's finally out - - don't expect her back till noon - - You live just down the street - - could be in and out long before she gets back - - nobody would even suspect you've been here - -

JACOB listens to ALAN'S response, then hangs up the receiver.

JACOB

(To himself.)

Hallelujah!

JACOB turns his wheelchair to face the exterior door at stage left. A moment later, ALAN comes in through that door.

ALAN

Hi, Jacob, what's going on with you?

JACOB

Thanks for coming - -

ALAN

Glad to see you.

JACOB

Goes to prove - - no friend like an old - - friend.

ALAN

I am your friend. Never doubt that.

JACOB

Knew I could count on you - - to do what's right - -

ALAN

You certainly can.

JACOB

Certainly appreciate it!

ALAN

(Pause.)

I wanted to make sure you don't do anything rash.

JACOB

Rash? Have you ever - -

ALAN

No, but I've never known you to be depressed before.

JACOB

I may be depressed - - but perfectly rational - - need to get out of this misery - -

ALAN

You do, but death is not the way out.

JACOB

It's the only way - -

ALAN

Look, Jacob, studies show that when people are depressed, their thinking is distorted. So what they think is rational may not be, objectively speaking.

JACOB

I'm perfectly rational - - Here's the logic: A. I can't play the piano. B. I can't live without playing the piano. Hence C. I can't live - - What's irrational about that?

ALAN

(Pause.)

Maybe you should see a psychiatrist just to talk things over. I think that might be helpful. I could recommend someone.

JACOB

Don't want anyone - - messing up my mind - -

ALAN

A psychiatrist could prescribe the appropriate medication.

JACOB

What a shrink considers appropriate - - not what I would call - - want a prescription that would put an end - -

ALAN

No doctor would do that.

JACOB

As a doctor, you could - - thought that's why you came - -

ALAN

See? That's what I mean. Thinking so is part of your distorted thought process. You should know me better than that.

JACOB

- - thought you're a friend - - nothing distorted about thinking that - -

ALAN

No, there isn't. I am your friend. But if what you expect from me is to help you commit suicide, forget it. You're on your own.

JACOB

Even if I knew what to take - - couldn't get anything without prescription - - no other way seems sure and swift - - couldn't get a prescription or anything else - - without Esther all over it - -

ALAN

I wouldn't be surprised.

JACOB

Since my stroke - - she refuses to leave me alone - - took a leave of absence from the law school - - days since she's gone out - - ordering everything by phone - -

ALAN

She's your wife.

JACOB

- - old independence gone - - like a different person - - more like a mother than a wife - - both kids coming home this afternoon - - semester break - - convinced her to go - - get something special - - My one chance - - can't you see? *(Pause.)* Only you can help me - - you know Esther wouldn't - -

ALAN

Esther loves you.

JACOB

Please, Alan, I need your help!

ALAN

And I love you, too.

JACOB

If you really love me - - help me out - -

ALAN

Sorry, Jacob. I could never stoop to being instrumental in causing your death. You have too much to live for.

JACOB

No!

ALAN

And as a doctor, I'm sworn to help preserve life rather than end it.

JACOB

There are exceptions - - as a doctor who really cares - -

ALAN

Believe me, Jacob, I really care about you.

JACOB

(Pause.)

And as a Jew?

ALAN

What do you mean?

JACOB

As a Jew - - you'd be obeying an important commandment - - Remember what we learned - - Hebrew school? - - Book of Leviticus - - ***"And you shall love your fellow Jew like yourself."*** - - one of the Taryag Mitzvot - - the 613 commandments listed by Maimonides - - Taking a fellow Jew out of his misery - - you'd be doing a real mitzvah!

ALAN

Sorry, Jacob, I can't.

JACOB

As a man?

ALAN

What are you talking about?

JACOB

As a man - - as a human being - - plain and simple - - Where's your empathy for - - a suffering soul?

ALAN

Believe me, Jacob, my heart goes out to you.

MAYA

On the Sabbath we always went to temple, like a good Jewish family should, and after the service there was usually a Kiddush, a reception, for the whole congregation, with lots of food in honor of someone or other who was deceased but was still remembered by someone else. Sometimes it occurred to me that maybe people came to temple on the Sabbath just so they could gorge themselves at the Kiddush. If you only saw the way they used to bump into each other with their plastic utensils and plastic plates as they rushed back and forth to the buffet table!

JACOB

Please, Alan - -

ALAN

Look Jacob, you're a loved and gifted man. Once you get over your depression, you'll see your way clearly to using your gifts again.

JACOB

Never!

MAYA

There wasn't much time for Jacob to practice piano on the Sabbath. Actually, come to think of it, Jacob couldn't practice on the Sabbath anyway because it was the Sabbath and playing the piano on the Sabbath is forbidden because in the

Jewish tradition playing the piano is considered work and you're not allowed to work on the Sabbath. You're supposed to be like God, who created the world and then rested on the seventh day.

ALAN

I hope you give serious thought to seeing a psychiatrist. It could be very helpful.

JACOB

When have I ever begged you to do something? - - begging you now - - were kids together - - always been my best friend - -

ALAN

Yes. *(Pause.)* I still remember all those Sundays I spent at your house, just listening to you playing the piano from morning until evening. After all the school and homework, after all the temple receptions and all the other mundane happenings of the week, what a delight it was to leave all that behind and just allow your music to wash over me. I especially loved it when you played Mozart. So joyous, so uplifting! I still cherish those memories. My childhood - indeed my life - would not have been as rich if you had not been my friend, Jacob, and I can never thank you enough. The least I owe you is to encourage you to live.

The sound of early Mozart piano music, lightly and evenly played, is heard. After a minute or two, the music fades away.

MAYA

I never told anyone but I think you in the audience should know. Alan was like a second son to me, the second son I couldn't have. He and Jacob loved each other like two brothers.

JACOB

If I can't count on you now, Alan - - what good is our friendship?

ALAN

(Pause.)

Listen, Jacob. I have some patients coming to the office so I have to run. I'll talk to you later.

ALAN exits through the exterior door at stage left. JACOB bursts into tears. There is the sound of a car door being slammed and, a moment later, ESTHER appears at the exterior door, carrying a bag of groceries. JACOB quickly wipes off his tears with his good right hand.

ESTHER

Who was that I just saw driving away?

JACOB

Alan.

ESTHER

I thought so but I wasn't sure. His car was too far down the street when I pulled in. *(Pause.)* What a good friend you have in Alan! See, the world is not as bleak as you've been making it out to be. You have good friends. You have a family. And you know what the Jewish tradition values above all – family and friends.

MAYA

I'm so glad Esther is back. Maybe she can talk some sense into Jacob. I'm worried about him.

JACOB

Beginning to think - - Alan isn't much of a friend.

ESTHER

Jacob! How can you say that? He's been your friend since childhood!

JACOB

Please, Esther.

ESTHER

He was the best man, at our wedding. He's been our family doctor all these years. He took care of our kids when they were sick. Through thick and thin, he's always been there for us.

JACOB

So?

ESTHER

I just thought I'd make the point.

JACOB

That's your point of view.

ESTHER

It's the right point of view.

JACOB

Look, Esther, I'm entitled to my own point of view - - don't have to follow the "right" point of view, whatever that is - - I can think for myself. *(Pause.)*

ESTHER puts the bag of groceries on the coffee table and seats herself on the sofa..

ESTHER

Isn't it wonderful the kids are coming home today? *(Pause.)* Can't wait to see them. I sure miss them when they're away.

(Pause.) We haven't seen them since right after your stroke. How long has it been now? About ten weeks, right? *(Pause.)* Wasn't it wonderful of them to drop everything right in the middle of their semester and fly in just so they could visit you at the hospital? Ben was right in the midst of his law school research papers. I still remember my law school days. Taking time off was out of the question. And my students, too. I don't know how many of them would take time off. They're so competitive they'd never allow anything to slow them down, not even family. And Becky had all those college essays to write. Remember? *(Pause.)* They were certainly concerned about you. *(Pause.)* They probably never even heard of a stroke before. How would they? I don't believe they ever knew anyone who had a stroke. None of their grandparents did. Their grandparents all died of other causes.

MAYA

You know what they say about mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, about how they're always fighting. Well, that wasn't true in our case. I always liked Esther, ever since I first laid eyes on her, when she was just a little girl. She was a few years younger than Jacob, but our families saw each other regularly at the temple on the Sabbath, and that's how Jacob and Esther first got to know each other. Did I mention that Esther's father was the rabbi at our temple? He was a very learned man. And Esther took after him. She was very smart in school, and later in college and in law school.

ESTHER

The kids probably thought you were about to die. *(Pause.)* They were so relieved to see that you survived the stroke, that you were still alive. *(Pause.)* What great kids we have! You can be proud of them. *(Pause.)*

MAYA

I couldn't have a second son, but at least when Jacob married Esther, I got myself a daughter. When they got married, after she graduated from law school, she took good care of Jacob even though she had a career. She cooked and cleaned and did all her other wifely duties without ever complaining. And later she took time off to have Ben and Becky, and she stayed home to take care of them until they started school. She always had her priorities straight, that's for sure. She must have gotten her values from her father, the rabbi. Not like some of those mothers you hear about these days; the last thing they want to do is take care of their family. Now I ask you: What is life about if not family?

ESTHER

Oh, dear, I nearly forgot. I'd better put the groceries away. I got some ice cream for the kids, and if I don't put it in the freezer, it's going to melt.

ESTHER gets up, picks up the grocery bag and walks nonchalantly past the piano, exiting at stage right. A moment later, BEN, carrying a duffle bag, walks in through the exterior door at stage left. He sees JACOB, drops his duffle and rushes over to hug his father. They embrace.

BEN

How're you doing, Dad?

JACOB

Don't know.

ESTHER comes in through the door at stage right.

ESTHER

I thought I heard something. Ben! How are you, son*? (Walks over and they embrace.)* How was your trip?

BEN

Fine. No delays. Plenty of cabs at Logan.

ESTHER

And how is law school?

BEN

Lots of work. But I'm enjoying it. Learning a lot.

ESTHER

Good! *(Spots his duffle.)* I'll bet you brought some laundry for me to do. *(Picks up his duffle.)* I'll get you something to eat. You're probably famished by now.

BEN

Yes, kind of. Thanks!

ESTHER

Maybe you can talk your dad into eating something. He hasn't been eating lately.

ESTHER exits at stage right, carrying BEN'S duffle. BEN seats himself on the sofa.

BEN

So how are you doing, Dad?

JACOB

See for yourself.

MAYA

What a nice boy Ben turned out to be. I know he's not exactly like Jacob. He never took to the piano, although, God knows, we tried to get him interested when he was little. Actually - and I hate to admit it - he can't even sing in tune. But at least he took after Esther, and that's nothing to sneeze at. He's very smart and doing well in law school and will have a wonderful career. But most importantly, he's devoted to his family and that's the main thing. How many kids are devoted to their family these days? Ben's got his values straight.

BEN

You're looking good, Dad. How's your leg doing?

JACOB

Better.

BEN

Did you get some physical therapy or what?

JACOB

Yes. The therapist - - gave me leg exercises - - left leg not quite back to normal - - at least I can walk now.

BEN

So why are you still in a wheelchair?

JACOB

Mom feels safer that way - - afraid I'll fall and hurt myself - -

BEN

Maybe it would be better if you walked around more so you could get some exercise.

JACOB

Tell your mom that - - I'm tired of arguing - - trying not to sweat the small stuff.

BEN

As opposed to?

JACOB

Don't know. Other stuff.

BEN

Like what?

JACOB

Mom wants me - - to see a shrink.

BEN

Are you serious? I didn't know she believes in shrinks. She always seemed to think they're charlatans, like the sorcerers of old.

JACOB

Guess she's changed her mind.

BEN

But why?

JACOB

She says I'm depressed.

BEN

And are you?

JACOB

Of course I am - - in my shoes, who wouldn't be? - - can't play the piano any more. *(JACOB wheels himself to the piano and, with great effort, raises his left arm. His hand falls dead on the piano, creating a loud, jarring sound. He pushes himself away from the piano and turns to face BEN.)* See?

BEN

(Looking at JACOB'S left hand.)

How about occupational therapy or whatever it's called? Wouldn't that help your hand?

JACOB

Had it - - Mom even did the hand exercises with me - - it's all been futile.

BEN

Are you serious?

JACOB

Even the best therapist - - the most devoted wife - - can't revive a dead hand.

BEN

That's awful! I know how important playing the piano is to you. I remember how you always played for hours and hours on end. The best thing was listening to you playing at night, when I was going to sleep. It was like listening to the most beautiful lullaby, a different lullaby every night. All that Bach and Handel. I loved falling asleep listening to you.

JACOB

Strange - - never realized you were listening - - guess I was just engrossed in my playing - - didn't think of anything else.

The sound of Bach piano music, impeccably played, is heard, with the notes even and distinct. After a minute or two, the music fades away.

BEN

I liked Bach best. His music was always so reassuring. It gave me the feeling that the world is orderly, that everything in the world is in its place, that right is right and wrong is wrong.

JACOB

Maybe that's - - what drew you to the law.

BEN

Maybe that, and Mom being a lawyer, too. I always admired not only her accomplishments but her clear thinking.

MAYA

See, I told you. Ben takes after his mother. But that's okay. Not everyone has to be a musician. Can you imagine if everyone in the world was a musician and there were no lawyers around?

BEN

What does the doctor say?

JACOB

He said if my hand wasn't better - - six or eight weeks after the stroke - - nothing will help.

BEN

Nothing?

JACOB

Nothing.

BEN

Maybe you should get a second opinion.

JACOB

Got a second opinion - - even a third - - nothing can be done this long after a stroke - - All the doctors agree on that.

BEN

(Pause.)

Maybe it's time for you to get rid of the piano, Dad.

MAYA

Oh, dear! Ben means well, I'm sure. He loves his father. But I hope he doesn't press Jacob on this. Even if Jacob can't play, the piano still holds wonderful memories for him.

BEN

Just so you won't be constantly reminded of the way you used to play.

MAYA

I still remember when we first got the grand piano for Jacob. Actually, it's the piano you see right here. He took it with him when he and Esther got married. Of course Jacob's first piano was an upright. But then, seeing how devoted he was to music, we got him a grand piano for his Bar Mitzvah. You can't compare the sound you get out of a grand piano to what you get from an upright. That open lid on the grand piano gives the music such a richness of sound that just listening to it you feel like you're in another world.

JACOB

Wouldn't want to part with my piano, Ben - - See that open lid? - - always looked to me like a bird's wing - - It's been a symbol - - my own ability to transcend the mundane. - -

Maybe you won't understand - - I want to have my piano around - - open lid - - until the very end.

BEN

I see. *(Pause.)* Well, at least you can still teach music, right? Your mental faculties haven't been impaired, or your speech, either. You can still talk and guide your students.

JACOB

I need to be able to play.

BEN

For teaching?

JACOB

Not for teaching - - for me - - I can't live without making music - - It's who I am. Without my music - - I am nothing.

BEN

Oh, Dad! How can you say that? I know how you love playing the piano, but that's a far cry from being nothing if you can't play. You are a wonderful husband, a wonderful father, a wonderful, kind human being.

JACOB

If I'm so wonderful - - why have I been punished?

BEN

I don't think you should view your stroke as a punishment. There's no accounting for these things. Bad things just happen, even to good people. The world is not the kind of ideal place that Bach's music made me think of when I was little and listened to you playing.

JACOB

(Pause.)

I really don't want to live - - this way.

BEN

I hope you're not contemplating suicide, Dad.

JACOB

I must confess - - thought of it.

BEN

And?

JACOB

I need help - - could starve myself - - would take too long - - don't know if I could withstand hunger and thirst - - for as long as it takes - - would much prefer to get something I can take - - a pill or an injection or something - - that will put me out of this - - in short order - - Can't do it with Mom around - - she's been watching me 'round the clock - - she suspects something - - of course I didn't tell her - - she'd fight it tooth and nails.

BEN

Of course she would.

JACOB

(Pause.)

Maybe you can - - get her out of the house - - for a few hours - - so I can take care of it - - Maybe a movie or something.

BEN

For God's sake, Dad. I can't believe my ears. Are you asking me to aid and abet in the suicide of my own father?

JACOB

You wouldn't be aiding and abetting - - just taking your mom to a movie.

BEN

If I took her to a movie under the circumstances, I'd be aiding and abetting. I'd be breaking the law.

JACOB

You'd just be getting - - an obstacle - - out of the way.

BEN

I would be considered to have assisted in a suicide. And assisting in a suicide is a crime in almost all states.

JACOB

How about Massachusetts?

BEN

Including Massachusetts.

JACOB

A progressive state - - with such an unenlightened view!

BEN

And I'm sure you'll agree that committing a crime is not a good thing for someone who aspires to be a lawyer to do.

JACOB

I thought suicide is no longer - - a crime in the United States - - don't know how it could ever have been a crime - - What would the government do? - - Punish a man after he's killed himself?

BEN

In western cultures, suicide has historically been considered a crime. It was unfavorably regarded even before Christianity took hold in western civilization. Do you know that as far back as ancient Athens, a person who committed suicide was denied the honor of a normal burial? That person would be buried alone, on the outskirts of the city, without a headstone or even a marker.

JACOB

Wouldn't worry about that.

BEN

In France in the 17th century, the punishment was even more severe. A criminal ordinance issued by King Louis XIV provided that a person who committed suicide would have his body drawn face down through the streets, and then hung and thrown on a garbage heap. In addition, all of the person's property would be forfeited.

JACOB

Leave it to the French.

BEN

The same was true in English law. All suicides carried automatic forfeiture penalties. Suicide was considered "a felony of a man's self" and prohibited by common law. And of course American law is based on English law.

JACOB

I see.

BEN

And if the suicide was not successful, the person attempting it could be prosecuted for attempted suicide.

JACOB

That just underscores - - the importance of being successful - - in trying to commit suicide - - as in everything else.

BEN

Or, better yet, not trying to do it at all.

JACOB

I really don't understand - - why the state has to meddle in these things - - What interest does it have - - compelling people to remain alive? The constitution guarantees the right to life, liberty - - and the pursuit of happiness - - If I'm unable to pursue happiness - - therefore don't want to live - - why should the state act to preserve my life?

BEN

It's the law, Dad, and we have to abide by the law. Maybe some day the law will change, but until it does, we have to obey it.

MAYA

See? I told you. Ben will make a great lawyer.

ESTHER walks in from stage right.

ESTHER

I prepared a tuna sandwich and some cold milk for you, Ben. They're on the kitchen table. And there's ice cream, too. I'm going to take care of your laundry now.

BEN and ESTHER exit at stage right. JACOB is seated in his wheelchair as before, his left arm dangling, his head now lowered. After a while, ESTHER walks in carrying a tray of food through the door at stage right and places the tray on the coffee table in front of the sofa.

ESTHER

Ben's gone out to see some friends. What did you two talk about?

JACOB

About the law - - Ben seems very interested - -

ESTHER

Of course. That's why he's in law school. *(Pointing to the food on the tray.)* I thought you'd be hungry by now.

JACOB

Actually, I'm not.

ESTHER

I made you your favorite, grilled cheese on raisin toast.

MAYA

Sounds almost as good as my cheese blintzes.

JACOB

Not hungry.

ESTHER

You have to eat.

JACOB

I don't have to if I don't want to.

ESTHER

You know you can't just starve yourself to death.

JACOB

Please, Esther - - I can starve myself if I want to.

ESTHER

How about a glass of milk? I brought you some nice, cold milk.

JACOB

No, thanks - - I'm not thirsty.

ESTHER

(Seating herself on the sofa and reaching for her sandwich.) Look, Jacob, think about the bright side. The stroke could have been much worse. It could have killed you right there and then, on the spot. Or it could have affected your mind, made you a vegetable. Think about how awful that would have been, to have you just lying there, like a vegetable. I think we should thank God that in His great mercy He spared us any of that.

ESTHER begins eating her sandwich.

JACOB

God!

ESTHER

Actually, it was a miracle that you were in class when it happened and that your student was alert enough to notice there was something wrong and called an ambulance. A few moments might have made all the difference in the world. God works in mysterious ways.

JACOB

God, God, God! - - Why do you keep bringing God into this? - - "God's miracle!" - - "God's mercy!" - - Don't you realize how absurd this talk about God is - - under the circumstances?

ESTHER

What are you saying, Jacob? You've always been a believer!

JACOB

It's pretty hard to be a believer - - when you've had a stroke.

ESTHER

For Heaven's sake, Jacob. You can't mean that!

JACOB

If there were a God, a kind, just, merciful God - - the type of God worth believing in - - He wouldn't let bad things happen to good people.

ESTHER

Maybe He's just testing us.

JACOB

Testing us?

ESTHER

Why not? This wouldn't be the first time in history that God has tested His chosen people. Remember the story of Abraham the Patriarch? How God commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac? Abraham and his wife, Sarah, waited for years to have a child and they finally did when they were both very old. And when Isaac was just a young boy, suddenly God commanded Abraham to take the child up the mountain, build an altar and sacrifice his beloved son to prove his own unwavering faith in God. And do you remember how Abraham was ready, able and willing to sacrifice Isaac just to show God the strength of his faith? He even proceeded to tie Isaac down on the altar and had all the kindling wood ready. And it was only when God saw how much faith Abraham had in Him - such great faith that he was

willing to sacrifice his own beloved son just because God had commanded him to do so - that God sent a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son. It was just a test and Abraham stood the test.

JACOB

I always found that story disturbing - - God demanding that a parent sacrifice his child - - just to prove a point.

MAYA

I understand what Jacob is saying. And actually I agree with him. As a mother, I'm not sure I would obey God if He asked me to sacrifice my child the way He asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. How could a Jewish parent make such a sacrifice? The Ten Commandments say you have to honor your father and your mother. How can a child honor his parents if the parents don't honor him enough to do everything in their power to make sure he lives?

ESTHER

It was an important point God wanted Abraham to prove. Faith in God is important. It gives us the strength we might not otherwise have to go through life's trials and tribulations. Do you remember the story of Job? That good and decent man was also tested by God. Remember how Job had seven sons and three daughters and a vast fortune? He was the richest man of his day as well as the most righteous. And just to test him, God killed all ten of Job's children and destroyed his fortune and even inflicted on Job a terrible sickness. As I recall, Job was stricken with hideous, painful boils. Yet Job persevered in his faith in God, although it certainly wasn't easy. And then, finally, God realized how faithful Job had been to Him through thick and thin and He restored Job's fortunes and cured him of his sickness and even allowed him to have ten additional kids, to replace the ones who had perished.

JACOB

Did you say - - "to replace the ones who had perished"?

ESTHER

Yes. Don't you remember the story?

JACOB

And to you it's the mark of a God - - worthy of worship?

ESTHER

Why not? That's the point in the story. That God is just. That He rewards people for their faith in Him.

JACOB

After He first punishes them.

ESTHER

But that's how He tests them.

JACOB

It never made sense to me - - that the second set of kids was an adequate replacement - - for Job's first ten children.

ESTHER

Maybe not. But restorative justice is never perfect. Maybe even God can only do His best.

MAYA

Maybe Esther is right after all. She knows a lot about Judaism. Don't forget, her father was a rabbi.

JACOB

And how about all the physical suffering Job had to endure? - - The boils? The excruciating pain? - - Could the experience of all that pain ever be erased from Job's memory? - - As

I recall, when he was suffering all that pain - - Job's wife advised him to curse God and be done with it. - - She was hoping that if Job cursed God - - that God would strike him down - - and end his suffering. - - I think Job's wife really felt for her husband - - she saw God in a truer light than Job did.

MAYA

Now Jacob is making more sense. Why would God let good people suffer?

ESTHER

Job was wise enough to ignore her advice. And he was rewarded by God for his persistent faith.

JACOB

I wouldn't have wanted to go on living if I were in Job's shoes - - I would have given up.

ESTHER

I know. That's the problem. You're too prone to give up.

JACOB

If I were Job - - I would have committed suicide.

ESTHER

For God's sake, Jacob. Don't say that! Suicide is not an option.

MAYA

Now Esther is making more sense again. She can't allow my son to commit suicide! He has too much to live for. He has a family.

JACOB

Why not?

ESTHER

Don't you know how suicide has been viewed throughout our people's history? The duty of preserving life is one of the basic tenets of Judaism. And the proscription of suicide is just a corollary to that duty. Don't forget that at first God created only a single human being in the world: Adam. God only created Adam to teach us that if any person has caused a single soul to perish, God regards that person as if he had caused the whole world to perish. And, of course, the corollary is also true: If any human being saves a single soul, God regards him as if he saved the whole entire world.

JACOB

Suicide is nowhere forbidden in the Old Testament. - - It's not in the Ten Commandments.

ESTHER

Maybe not explicitly, but it's analogous to murder. The sixth commandment says, ***"Thou shalt not kill."***

JACOB

There's a big difference between - - committing suicide and committing murder. - - In suicide you don't hurt anybody else - - you just end your own life.

ESTHER

Actually, murder and suicide are very similarly viewed in the Jewish tradition. In both instances, the sovereignty of God is deemed to be denied. In Judaism, the giving and taking of life is exclusively the domain of God. A person doesn't have a proprietary interest in his life.

JACOB

I see we're back to God again.

ESTHER

Suicide is considered to be a grave sin in Judaism because it's a denial that human life is a divine gift. Suicide defies God's will for each person to live the life span allotted to him.

JACOB

There you go again.

ESTHER

All life is deemed to belong to Him, and its beginning and end are to be only in His hands. Do you remember that saying from the Ethics of the Fathers? It goes something like: ***"Despite yourself you were fashioned, and despite yourself you were born, and despite yourself you live, and despite yourself you die, and despite yourself you will hereafter have account and reckoning before the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."*** Actually, traditionally in Judaism, no rites were to be performed in honor of those who took their own lives, and the bodies of Jews who committed suicide were buried on the outskirts of a Jewish cemetery, rather than inside it.

JACOB

I wouldn't be concerned about that.

MAYA

Jacob, darling. Don't be stubborn like your father! Listen to your wife!

ESTHER

And don't forget that according to the Jewish tradition, someone who commits suicide forfeits his possibility of an afterlife.

MAYA

Jacob, listen to her! She's warning you!

JACOB

At this point - - I wouldn't be concerned about that, either.

ESTHER

(Pause.)

Jacob, I think you're depressed.

JACOB

Of course I am. - - I have reason to be.

ESTHER

Maybe you should see a shrink.

JACOB

I don't want anyone messing with my mind.

ESTHER

(Pause.)

How about having your sandwich and milk after all?

JACOB

No, thanks - - don't have an appetite.

BECKY, carrying a duffle bag, walks in through the exterior door at stage left. She notices JACOB, drops her duffle and rushes over to hug her father. They embrace. JACOB bursts into tears.

BECKY

Don't cry, Dad. Please don't cry. It makes me so sad to see you cry. I don't think I've ever seen you cry, Dad. Aren't you happy to see me?

JACOB wipes away his tears.

JACOB

You know I am - - Becky - - love you!

ESTHER gets up from the sofa.

ESTHER

Becky! How are you? *(She walks over to BECKY and they embrace.)* How was your trip?

BECKY

Fine. Glad to be home. Did Ben get back yet?

ESTHER

Yes, he's out to see some friends. He should be back before too long.

BECKY

Can't wait to see him.

ESTHER

I know. You two are so close although your personalities are so different. *(Pause.)* Tell me, Becky, how is college? Are you enjoying your art classes?

BECKY

Love them. Especially the painting class. We have a great professor. He's all about using the tools of art for self expression.

ESTHER

Good! *(Pause.)* I'll get you something to eat. Maybe you can talk your dad into having something, too, even if it's just a glass of milk. He's been on a hunger strike.

ESTHER picks up the tray and BECKY'S duffle and exits at stage right.

BECKY

(Stroking JACOB'S head.)

What's that about you not eating, Dad? Is that true*? (Studies him.)* You do seem a bit thinner than I remember.

MAYA

What a lovely young lady Becky turned out to be, don't you think? She's pretty and smart, but the main thing is, she's devoted to her family. What they call "a nice Jewish girl." You can feel how much she loves her father.

JACOB

Don't have an appetite - - sitting around like this - -

BECKY

Have you been sitting in the wheelchair a lot?

JACOB

Most of my waking hours - - Mom thinks it's safer.

BECKY

How's your leg?

JACOB

Much better - - a bit unsteady on my feet - - basically, I can walk.

BECKY

So why does Mom want you to stay in the wheelchair? Doesn't make sense to me. Come. Let's walk. *(Pointing to the wheelchair.)* Is this thing locked?

JACOB

Yes, it is.

BECKY

Good. I'll help you get up and we can walk a little together. *(Bends down and helps JACOB stand up.)* Here. Hold on to me. *(Extends her left elbow and JACOB grasps it with his right hand.)* Let's walk around a bit.

JACOB

Okay.

JACOB and BECKY walk slowly around the living room, with JACOB limping while holding fast onto BECKY.

MAYA

See? That's the way daughters are. They're as close to their father as boys are to their mother. How lucky Jacob is to have a daughter! *(Pause.)* I still remember how close I was to my own father. He was a rabbi, you know, a wonderful man, not only learned but kind, very kind. Even people who were not members of our congregation - total strangers - would come over to our house to seek his help, and he spared them nothing. They were always welcome at our table. *(Pause.)* Would you believe I still miss him? Not a day goes by that I don't think about my dear father. And I'm already a grandmother!

BECKY

You're doing great, Dad. You should walk around more often, just for the exercise. *(They arrive at the piano.)* And how is your playing?

JACOB

Can't play any more.

BECKY

Show me!

BECKY pulls the piano stool over so it stands in front of the piano, then helps JACOB sit on it.

JACOB

I mean it - - really can't play.

BECKY

Please, Dad. I want to hear you play.

JACOB

You sure?

BECKY

Oh, Dad! How can you ask? One of the fondest memories I have of growing up in this house is listening to you play the piano at all hours of the day and night. You always played so beautifully, so expressively, I'll never forget it. I especially loved listening to you at night, just before I went to sleep. It was like listening to a lullaby. I loved all that Schumann and Chopin you used to play. Especially the Chopin. So emotional. So romantic So touching.

A Chopin nocturne is heard in the background. JACOB and BECKY listen and look at each other fondly.

JACOB

Maybe that's when you decided - - to become an artist.

BECKY

I wouldn't be surprised. Your playing was so expressive, it always moved me so. It was downright inspirational.

JACOB

And to think - - I didn't even realize you were listening! - - I guess I was oblivious to everything - - just playing for myself.

BECKY

I always felt like you were speaking directly to me with your music.

JACOB

Oh, Becky!

BECKY

Play a little, Dad.

JACOB

I told you I can't

BECKY

Just try. Please. For me, Dad. Just try.

JACOB plays some Chopin music with his right hand, with BECKY standing beside him, watching happily.

BECKY

Beautiful. Beautiful! Now try with both hands.

JACOB

I can't.

BECKY

Please, Dad. Just try it. For me.

JACOB straightens up on his stool. With great effort, he raises his left arm. His left hand falls dead on the piano, creating a loud, shrill sound.

BECKY

(Looking at JACOB'S left hand.)

Oh, Dad. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it was that bad. How stupid of me! Please forgive me. *(She bursts into tears.)*

JACOB tries to get off the stool and BECKY helps him up. She wipes away her tears as they walk together slowly and BECKY helps JACOB into the wheelchair. She strokes JACOB'S head, then walks over to the sofa and sits down.

BECKY

Have you had therapy for your hand?

JACOB

Physical and occupational - - lots of it - - none of it worked - - maybe a slight improvement in the gross motion of my fingers - - none at all in the finger dexterity required for playing the piano. - - As far as piano playing - - my left hand is dead - -

BECKY

Oh man! Please don't say that. Don't use that word. It scares me.

JACOB

Sorry, Becky - - have to call the shots the way I see them - - was never one to beat about the bush - - You know that.

BECKY

I assume you spoke to the doctor.

JACOB

Yes.

BECKY

And what did he say?

JACOB

If there was no improvement in the finger dexterity - - in six or eight weeks after the stroke - - it's hopeless.

BECKY

And how long has it been now since your stroke?

JACOB

Ten weeks.

BECKY

You know what they say. It's good to get a second opinion.

JACOB

Got a second opinion - - even got a third one. - - All the doctors agree - - it's hopeless.

BECKY

Oh, Dad. I'm so sorry. What are we going to do?

JACOB

That is the question.

MAYA

Becky really understands Jacob. She knows how he feels. After all, she's an artist, too, and she knows how artists feel when they're no longer able to express themselves through their art. Notice she said, "What are we going to do?" and not "What are you going to do?" She has taken Jacob's suffering to heart. She feels his pain. That's what is called "empathy," isn't it?

BECKY

Well, let's try to analyze the situation. I assume you can still teach. And I know how much you love teaching.

JACOB

I do.

BECKY

But I also know that teaching alone wouldn't be satisfying enough for you, just as teaching art would not be as satisfying for me as painting. Because artists need to express themselves through their art. I understand that.

JACOB

Remarkable insight - -

BECKY

For the same reason, I'm sure just listening to music wouldn't satisfy you.

JACOB

That's true. *(Pause.)* Becky darling - - I'm amazed to see - - how well you understand me. - - Actually, "amazed" is not the right word - - "gratified" is better - - I'm gratified that you understand how I feel - - don't think anyone else understands - - seems you and I have always had a special bond - - as if we could read each other's mind - - without even talking.

BECKY

Maybe because we're both artists.

JACOB

Wouldn't be surprised.

BECKY

I love you, Dad. Do you think that composing music might satisfy you?

JACOB

Maybe. As you know - - have done some composing over the years - - certainly enjoyed it - - but it's hard to compose if you can't actually play - - listen to your composition as you're going along. - - In the past, I've mainly found fulfillment - - interpreting other people's great music. - - Like a movie or stage director - - who brings his interpretation of a story to life. - - The director doesn't write the story - - he has a vision of a story that someone else wrote - - tries to bring forth that vision. - - There have been some great composers in the history of music. - - I've always loved getting to the bottom of their music - - and expressing my vision of it by playing.

BECKY

And you've been great at doing it, that's for sure. But if you can no longer do it, we need to find another way. *(Pause.)* You don't seem happy, Dad. You were always so happy and I want you to be happy again.

JACOB

I know.

BECKY

Because I love you.

JACOB

I love you too, Becky.

BECKY

So what are we going to do? What is the answer? I'm trying to think of an answer.

JACOB

I've only been able to come up with one answer, Becky. - - Hard as I've tried not to think of it - - I come back to it again and again.

BECKY

And what is that answer?

JACOB

(Pause.)

That I simply bow out.

BECKY

No, Dad. No! You can't do that. You can't just bow out.

BECKY gets up, walks over to JACOB and hugs him. They embrace.

JACOB

I love you, Becky.

JACOB bursts into tears. BECKY stands beside her father and strokes his head.

BECKY

Look, Dad. You have a loving family. A loving wife, a loving son and a loving daughter. Each and every one of us would be devastated if you were gone. Don't you realize that?

JACOB

That does make it harder.

BECKY

Just speaking for myself, I know I would have a very difficult time going on if I didn't know that you were always there for me. If I couldn't just call you on the phone and speak to you and tell you what's on my mind and have you listen and understand and be supportive. You've always been there for me, Dad, and I can't imagine not having you around any more. I'm only nineteen years old, much too young to be an orphan, or even half a one. I need you as much now as I ever did. And some day I'll get married and I want you to meet my man and be there at our wedding and I want you to get to know my children and I want my children to get to know you.

JACOB

I've always looked forward to that.

BECKY

And of course none of it would be possible if you simply "bowed out" as you call it. You have to be strong, Dad. I think that's what being a dad is all about. Being there for your family because you love them and they love you.

MAYA

I told you, Becky is something else. She understands things far beyond her years. What a wonderful daughter Jacob has!

ESTHER walks in from stage right.

ESTHER

Becky, I prepared a cheese sandwich for you and some cold milk. They're in the kitchen. And there's ice cream, too. I'm going to do your laundry now.

BECKY gives JACOB a hug. ESTHER and BECKY exit at stage right. Time passes. JACOB is seated in his wheelchair

as before, his head down. BEN and BECKY enter the room through the door at stage right. JACOB sits up in his wheelchair when he hears them come in. BEN and BECKY walk up to JACOB and hug him in turn.

JACOB

(Noticing their jackets.)

You two going out?

BEN

Yes. We thought we'd catch up on things.

BECKY

Hope you don't mind, Dad. It's been weeks since Ben and I were together. There's nothing like higher education to separate siblings.

BEN

How true!

ESTHER enters from stage right.

ESTHER

Have a good time, kids. But remember, don't stay out too late. You've both had a long day. And yes, Ben, drive carefully. I don't want you to wreck Dad's car.

JACOB

Or get hurt.

MAYA

Amen.

BEN

Okay

BEN and BECKY exit through the door at stage left.

ESTHER

(Seating herself on the sofa.)

I'll bet they have a lot to talk about. All these weeks being apart. The last time they were together was when they came to visit you at the hospital right after your stroke. How long has it been? Ten weeks?

JACOB

Ten long weeks.

ESTHER

They're really good friends, not just siblings.

JACOB

Good. They'll need each other.

ESTHER

(Pause.)

I wouldn't be surprised if they sensed you're depressed. They're both very sensitive.

JACOB

Yes.

ESTHER

They probably guessed you're thinking of suicide.

JACOB

They didn't have to guess. - - I told them.

ESTHER

No!

JACOB

No point trying to hide it.

ESTHER

I believe there are some things that are the domain of adults, not children.

JACOB

Ben and Becky are not children. - - Ben's already 23 and Becky's 19.

ESTHER

They're still our children and it's our obligation to protect them.

JACOB

I had to tell them.

ESTHER

Had to?

JACOB

I was hoping to get their moral support - - if not their cooperation.

ESTHER

Cooperation? Just what do you mean by "cooperation"? Do you want your own kids to kill you or what?

JACOB

No, I'd never go that far - - just wanted them to know - - to understand and…

ESTHER

For Heaven's sake, Jacob, what's come over you? How can you be so selfish as to involve your own kids in your suicide? You're thinking of nobody but yourself. Don't you realize that assisting in a suicide is against the law?

JACOB

So I heard from Ben - - even in Massachusetts - - our wonderfully progressive state.

ESTHER

Ben was right. Actually, Massachusetts is progressive in this respect. Even enlightened. It's the way most states view assisting suicide.

JACOB

Incredible!

ESTHER

Protecting human life is one of a state's paramount obligations.

JACOB

But it's my life. - - If I want to end it, the state should stay out of it. - - It's none of the state's business!

ESTHER

Of course it is! Can you imagine if the state allowed people to commit suicide willy-nilly? What a burden that would impose on the state!

JACOB

Burden!? - - It would free up some much needed space.

ESTHER

For Heaven's sake, Jacob. You can't be serious. Take the case of fathers. If fathers were allowed to commit suicide with impunity, the state would have all those widows and children to support. It's usually the man who is the chief breadwinner in the family. When he is gone, leaving a wife and children, the support of the family could easily devolve upon the state. On the taxpayers.

JACOB

At least in our case, that wouldn't apply. - - You have a good job. - - You're a professor of law. - - Judging by your past record, you could easily support - - yourself and the kids without my income. - - Actually, there'd be one less mouth to feed if I were gone.

ESTHER

You haven't exactly been eating excessively.

JACOB

And realistically - - my income in the future would be - - a lot smaller than it was in the past - - since I couldn't perform, only teach. - - So just doing the math - - you'd probably all be doing better - - financially - - without me.

ESTHER

Whatever your income level, it's still income.

JACOB

I shouldn't have to make a decision about - - whether to live or die - - on the basis of financial considerations. - - You and the kids would do fine without me.

ESTHER

Aside from the financial aspect, I need you to help me raise the kids.

JACOB

But they're all raised. - - mature adults. - - They'll do fine without me. - - Ben will be finished with law school - - less than two years - - then he's on his own. - - And Becky - - done with college - - the year after that. - - I have complete confidence - - she'll do well for herself. - - a wonderful young lady.

ESTHER

Are you serious? I never realized how selfish you are. I always thought you were a very considerate person, putting the family's interests above your own. Maybe I didn't really know you although we've been married nearly a quarter of a century. Or is it possible that a stroke could change a person's character from being a selfless, considerate family man, into a self-centered, egotistical one?

JACOB

Maybe that's exactly - - what a serious illness does to a person.

ESTHER

It doesn't have to. You can be considerate no matter what the circumstances. You can think about other people's interests, not just your own.

JACOB

I think everybody's interest would be served - - if I were gone, - - whether they know it or not.

ESTHER

(Pause.)

No matter what argument I raise, you've got an answer. You don't seem to realize what your suicide would do to this family. Aside from everything I mentioned, there's the psychological aspect. Our kids would go through life feeling terrible guilt. From the time you commit suicide until the end of their days, they will ask themselves day after day if there was anything they could have done to prevent their father's suicide. And they'll imagine a thousand and one things they could have done. If only... If only... They'll have the burden of guilt on their shoulders for the rest of their lives. They'll never know one day of peace.

MAYA

Smart girl, Esther. She's reminded him about the family. That's the most important thing!

JACOB

Both of them are smart enough to realize - - they had nothing to do with it - - that it was just the way I felt about my own life - - that made me do it.

ESTHER

What a horrible example you'd be setting for them, that they should quit rather than go on fighting.

JACOB

There's a time to fight and a time to quit. - - I hope they know the difference.

ESTHER

The bottom line is that you don't value life.

JACOB

On the contrary. - - I value it so much - - I won't accept a living death as a substitute.

ESTHER

That's convoluted thinking if I ever heard any.

JACOB

No, it's the truth pure and simple.

ESTHER

(Pause.)

It's not just the feeling of guilt your suicide would impose on Ben and Becky. It's also the feeling of shame. Forever more, from the day you are gone until the day they go to their Maker, they'll be blamed by others for your death. Nobody will know why you committed suicide. Chances are nobody outside our family and friends would even care. But everybody will make up a reason why you did it. Perfect strangers, who would never even give us the time of day. And rumors would be flying around and horrible things will be said about our family to explain why the father of the family committed suicide. People will come up with stories, horrible stories, and these stories will follow Ben and Becky until they breathe their last breath. Surely you don't want to impose that kind of destiny on your own children!

MAYA

Yes, Esther, tell him! Jacob's in such pain, he's lost sight of things. When all is said and done, it's the family that counts.

JACOB

I can't let strangers determine - - what I do with my own life.

ESTHER

And think what you would be doing to me. For the rest of my life I will be blamed for your suicide. Total strangers who neither know me nor care would say I'm to blame. Because I'm your wife and it's the wife's duty to keep her husband happy and if the husband commits suicide, the wife must have done something wrong. Jacob, I refuse to live the rest of my life being blamed by everyone for your death. I couldn't even go to temple without being accused, mostly behind my back, of having done unknown wrongs. And at the law school, faculty and students alike will point the finger of blame at me for years to come simply because I'm your wife. I don't think I could go on teaching, Jacob, knowing each day that I have to face all those vicious rumors, all those lies. I'd have to quit my job. And I'd probably be too ashamed to get another job, because the rumors would follow me wherever I go. And then, how would I support myself and the kids? I don't want to have to rely on the state for charity.

JACOB

You're a strong woman, Esther. - - I was hoping you'd get through it.

ESTHER

I never would. Never! Your suicide would follow me and the kids for the rest of our lives. Look, Jacob, suicide may take a moment to commit, but it subjects those left behind to a lifetime of guilt and shame. *(Pause.)* You have to get help, Jacob. You have to see a shrink. There are medications that can help you out of this suicidal depression. I know you can become your own self again and meet each day with happy anticipation, the way you always did.

JACOB

(Pause.)

Wish I could believe that's possible.

ESTHER

You have to. Look, Jacob, I can talk until I'm blue in the face. The bottom line is that I want to have you with me for as long as God in His mercy allows. I have known you practically all my life, ever since we first met at the temple when I was just a little girl and you were a little boy. I think I fell in love with you right there at one of those temple receptions when I watched you devouring all those blintzes piled up on your plate. I knew right there and then that some day we would be together as man and wife. The feeling that we belong together has never left me. I know in my heart that you can again find joy in living. Much as the loss of your ability to play the piano means to you, you can still teach and guide your students to be great performers. And you can find new avenues to express yourself. For an artist, the possibilities are boundless. And just because we don't know ahead of time what those possibilities are, that doesn't mean they're not there to be discovered. I have full confidence that God's light will shine upon you again.

JACOB

I wish.

MAYA

See, I told you. I have the best daughter-in-law in the world. No matter what the difficulties, she keeps her eyes on what's important: family love. And she never loses faith. If everyone were like this, the world wouldn't be in the terrible shape it's in. Only love and faith can save us.

ESTHER

(Pause.)

Don't you love me any more, Jacob?

JACOB wheels himself toward Esther and reaches with his right hand for her hand, which she extends to him. For a moment, they hold hands in silence.

JACOB

(Looks tenderly into ESTHER'S eyes as he holds her hand.)

I do.

ESTHER

(Looking tenderly into JACOB'S eyes.)

And I love you, too, Jacob.

The sound of Beethoven's Appassionata sonata is heard for a minute or two, then slowly fades away.

MAYA

Did you hear that music? I always loved listening to Jacob playing it. It's Beethoven's Appassionata sonata. Beethoven composed it when he was already deaf. In it he expressed the power of man to overcome the forces of nature. *(Pause.)* Actually, Beethoven became deaf when he was only about thirty years old. Like my son, Beethoven, too, contemplated suicide. He was disgusted at the unfairness of life, that he, a musician, should become deaf. In a letter to his family he spoke of the difficulty of living with his handicap. He wrote, *"...it's not easy, and for an artist much more difficult than for anyone else..."* But then he gathered the courage to go on living and said, "... *Perhaps I shall get better, perhaps not; I am ready..."* And do you know what? Although he never regained his hearing, he kept on composing for the rest of his life. Maybe Jacob can derive courage from Beethoven. Maybe Jacob, too, can have faith.

JACOB

Before I do anything else, Esther, let me close the lid on my piano. That open lid has always made me think of a bird's wing. It always symbolized to me a magical being soaring through the sky, reaching heights that we earthlings might never reach any other way than through music. I need to close that lid because the raised lid will always remind me that I may never soar above the earth again. Maybe if I don't have this constant reminder of the way things were, I wouldn't feel so bad.

ESTHER smiles. JACOB wheels himself away from ESTHER, allowing his hand to slowly detach itself from hers, turns his wheelchair so as to face the piano, then wheels himself toward the piano and stops. He locks his wheelchair, rises, and limps over to the piano. Then, raising his left arm with great difficulty, he manages to grip the prop stick with his left hand. He reaches for the lid with his right hand, raises the lid slightly while lowering the prop stick, then loses his balance. He stumbles. The stage lights go out. The sound of a hard object hitting another hard object is heard, followed by the sound of the piano lid crashing.

ESTHER

(Screaming, rising from the sofa and running toward JACOB.)
Jacob!

MAYA

(Wailing.)
My son! My son! I'm right here! Right here!

CURTAIN

GOOD OLD ABRAHAM

A full length play in three acts

GOOD OLD ABRAHAM was first performed by the Shades Repertory Theater under the direction of its Artistic Director, Samuel Harps, on April 15, 2010. The performance took place at the historic Central Presbyterian Church, 64 New Main Street, Haverstraw, New York, U.S.A.

The actors were:

JOSHUA	Spencer Kennard
AARON	Jim Coakley
ABRAHAM	Lou Morris
SARAH	Linda Rosen
ISAAC	Jeff Golda
HAGAR	Tricia Castaldo
ISHMAEL	Peter Schonbachler
VOICE O.S.	Charles Castrovinci

Stacey Cretekas was **SARAH'S** understudy.

Suzanne Du Charme served as Assistant to the Director.

CHARACTERS

JOSHUA An American teenager, AARON'S son.

AARON A middle aged man, a widower, a rabbi.

ABRAHAM An elderly but youthful looking man.

SARAH ABRAHAM'S elderly but youthful and attractive looking wife.

ISAAC ABRAHAM'S and SARAH'S son, a teenager who grows up.

HAGAR A beautiful woman of uncertain age.

ISHMAEL ABRAHAM and HAGAR'S son, a teenager who grows up.

VOICE O.S. A man's voice off stage, representing God.

TIME AND PLACE

The play takes place simultaneously in contemporary America and in ancient Canaan. Time indications at the beginning of ACT TWO and ACT THREE pertain to the contemporary scene. To accommodate the division between the contemporary and the ancient scenes, the stage is sectioned into two parts throughout the play: first, a very small area at stage right downstage, where the contemporary events take place; and, second, the main stage, where the ancient saga unfolds. The contemporary scene, which is well lit, is a very small space, a portion of a room, and contains a table, two chairs and a bookcase. There is no wall or other opaque barrier between this space and the main stage. The ancient scene is in a desert-like space, with scattered rocks and branches on the ground and a suggestion of distant barren hills. There is a small shrub near downstage center, and, nearby, a large flat-topped rock, which can double as the top of a well. A small, rectangular tent stands upstage at stage left, running lengthwise parallel to the stage front. The tent has the flap closest to the audience raised so that its interior is visible. The tent's doorway is toward center stage. Pillows are amassed in a tall heap inside the tent. The characters on the main stage cannot see or hear what is taking place in the contemporary scene between AARON and JOSHUA. Nor can AARON see or hear what is transpiring on the main stage. However, by contrast, JOSHUA can see and hear the events unfolding there.

Throughout the play, while AARON and JOSHUA are having their study session, JOSHUA repeatedly and furtively glances over his left shoulder at the happenings on the main stage.

ACT ONE

The stage is dimly lit except for a brightly lit small space downstage at stage right, part of a room, where there is a table with two chairs. One of the chairs has its back to the main stage, the other is perpendicular to that chair and faces the audience. Near the table, at stage right downstage, is a bookcase full of books. As the curtain rises, AARON is standing in front of the bookcase, looking through the books. He picks out two identical-looking large volumes, places them on the table, one in front of each of the two chairs, then sits down on the chair that has its back to the main stage. He leafs through the book in front of him, then stops. Adjusting his skullcap, he begins reading silently to himself.

The illumination of the main stage suggests a dream-like atmosphere. ABRAHAM, dressed in a flowing robe, walks rapidly from stage left through the tent and emerges through the tent's doorway. At center stage, he paces this way and that, looking at the sky, as if searching for something.

SARAH, dressed in an ancient style long gown and heavily bejeweled, enters the tent from stage left. She walks through the tent and stops before reaching the tent's doorway. She is closely followed by HAGAR, who is similarly but not as richly attired. The two women stand near the tent doorway, watching ABRAHAM'S every move. SARAH intermittently shakes her head from side to side while HAGAR observes her. SARAH and HAGAR speak to each other from time to time, but their conversation is inaudible to the audience. After a while, SARAH silently walks back and exits at stage left, dutifully followed by HAGAR. Some time later, SARAH and HAGAR return and resume their previous positions. This back-and-forth activity of SARAH and HAGAR is repeated several times throughout this ACT.

ABRAHAM

Where are You? *(ABRAHAM continues pacing back and forth around the stage, searching the sky, then falls to his knees at center stage. While on his knees, he alternately looks at the sky and bows. Louder.)* Where are You?

AARON

(Stops reading and looks at his watch.)

Where are you, Josh? (*Listens for an answer. Louder.)* Joshua!

JOSHUA, somewhat disheveled, comes in from stage right, tucking his cell phone into his pants pocket. He quickly seats himself next to his father at the table, facing the audience.

JOSHUA

Sorry, Dad!

AARON

It's past three o'clock.

JOSHUA

I was just talking to Michael.

AARON

You know what we do on the Sabbath beginning at three.

JOSHUA

Oh jeez, Dad. Do we have to?

AARON

Tell me: What more important things do you have to do on Sabbath afternoon?

JOSHUA

Michael wanted to hang out.

AARON

You two can hang out some other time.

JOSHUA

None of my friends have to spend their Saturday afternoons studying.

AARON

Do you want to grow up as ignorant about your heritage as your friends will be about theirs?

JOSHUA

For seven long years I went to Hebrew School. Isn't that enough?

ABRAHAM

(Searching the sky.)

Can You hear me?

AARON

With all due respect, Hebrew School is no longer what it used to be.

JOSHUA

What do you mean?

AARON

I figured it out after your Bar Mitzvah.

JOSHUA

I thought you said I did well on my Bar Mitzvah.

AARON

You did.

JOSHUA

All those Blessings I had to chant!

AARON

You did well, but…

JOSHUA

And you said Mom would have been proud.

AARON

(Patting JOSHUA'S head lovingly.)

She certainly would have been. Very proud. You chanted everything perfectly. But afterwards I realized that Hebrew School didn't give you the proper background.

JOSHUA

And I had to do it all in Hebrew!

AARON

It was all done by rote. That's when I decided to take matters into my own hands. I can't let my only child grow up without a proper foundation. Mom would not have wanted me to.

JOSHUA

Oh man! I thought once I was done with my Bar Mitzvah, that was it.

AARON

Learning about your heritage is never done.

JOSHUA

Oh jeez!

ABRAHAM

Why will You not answer me?

AARON

Well, enough of this. Let's get started. Pay attention now, Josh. Where are we? Oh, yes. Do you remember what we studied last week?

JOSHUA

Last week?

AARON

Yes. Last Sabbath.

JOSHUA

Hmm.

AARON

Never mind for now. Let's do it another way, just to make sure you get the big picture. First of all, what book were we studying?

JOSHUA

The Bible.

AARON

You mean the Old Testament.

JOSHUA

What's the difference?

AARON

By "The Bible" people in America usually refer to the Old and the New Testament combined. The New Testament is a section that the Christians added to the Old Testament.

But in the Jewish tradition, "The Bible" only includes the Old Testament. So we can call it "The Bible" as long as we understand that here we are talking about the Old Testament.

JOSHUA

Okay.

ABRAHAM

Are You there?

AARON

And just to make sure you get the big picture, what parts are there to the Old Testament?

JOSHUA

What parts?

AARON

Yes, what parts?

JOSHUA

Give me a hint.

AARON

There are three parts.

JOSHUA

Oh. What are they?

AARON

That's what I'm asking you!

JOSHUA

Give me a hint.

AARON

The first part is the Torah. And what are the other two parts?

JOSHUA

Give me another hint.

AARON

Never mind. You can't just guess these things. You have to know them. After the Torah comes Neviim, and then we have Ketuvim, in that order. And what is each part made up of?

JOSHUA

What do you mean?

AARON

Each part is made up of several books.

JOSHUA

Gotcha.

AARON

Can you repeat the names of the three parts of the Old Testament?

JOSHUA

Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim.

AARON

Excellent! And do you know what we call all three parts of the Old Testament together?

JOSHUA

"The Old Testament."

ABRAHAM

Are You still there?

AARON

Please pay attention, Josh. They are called "Tanakh" – the "Taf" stands for "Torah," the "Nun" stands for "Neviim" and the "Kaf" stands for "Ketuvim." "Tanakh" is the Hebrew name for the Old Testament. Can you say "Tanakh"?

JOSHUA

Tanakh.

AARON

Excellent! But do you know what these terms – Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim – mean?

JOSHUA

Not really.

AARON

Well, "Torah" means "Teachings," "Neviim" means "Prophets" and "Ketuvim" means "Writings." So the three parts of the Old Testament are the Teachings, the Prophets and the Writings.

JOSHUA

But Dad, can't we just get to the reading? At this rate we'll never be done.

ABRAHAM

Why have You been silent?

AARON

You need a framework to understand what you're reading and I'm trying to give you a framework. Speaking of reading, can

you tell me which of the three parts of the Tanakh we were reading from last Sabbath?

JOSHUA

The first part, I guess.

AARON

Right! The Torah part. And what specific book of the Torah were we reading from?

JOSHUA

The first book?

AARON

Yes. The first book of the first part. The first part is the Torah, and it is made up of 5 books and we were reading from the first book, which is called what?

JOSHUA

Genesis?

AARON

Excellent! Genesis! We're getting somewhere. You're a smart boy, Josh, if only you would apply yourself. Now, do you remember what story we read last Sabbath?

ABRAHAM

Have I done anything to offend You?

JOSHUA

I think it was about Noah and the flood.

AARON

No. Noah was the previous Sabbath. Last Sabbath we studied another story.

JOSHUA

Which one?

AARON

That's what I'm asking you!

JOSHUA

I can't remember.

AARON

Think!

JOSHUA

I can't think of it.

AARON

The Tower of Babel.

JOSHUA

Oh, yeah, now I remember. God didn't approve of skyscrapers. I wonder what God would say if He ever came to America.

AARON

It isn't that God didn't approve of skyscrapers. What He didn't approve of was people's motive for building the Tower of Babel. People thought that by building a tall tower they could elevate themselves above God. So what was the lesson God taught mankind by destroying the Tower of Babel?

JOSHUA

I forget.

AARON

Think, Joshua, think! That's what God gave us a brain for. To think.

JOSHUA

I'm thinking, but I still can't figure it out. All I can think of is that the Tower of Babel story was a lot like Nine-Eleven. That tower crashing down on all those people!

AARON

Humility. By destroying the Tower of Babel, God was teaching mankind to be humble.

JOSHUA

And then I think of Mom getting killed on Nine-Eleven, right there when the Twin Towers came crashing down.

AARON

(Patting JOSHUA gently on the head.)

Yes, Josh. I think of Nine-Eleven myself. Mom was a wonderful woman, and she loved you very much. You and I both miss her. But we have to go on. That's what she would have wanted us to do. Don't you think?

JOSHUA

I guess so.

ABRAHAM

Please tell me, and I will mend my ways.

AARON

Listen, Josh. There's something fundamental you have to understand. Maybe I haven't made it clear enough. We read the Bible stories so we can learn from them. They're not there just to entertain us. They teach us important lessons. They

teach us how we should behave. With Mom gone, I feel my responsibility to teach you more keenly than ever. Do you understand?

JOSHUA

I guess.

AARON

The week before last we studied about Noah and the Great Flood. Now, what lesson do you suppose God wanted to teach us in that story?

JOSHUA

Beats me. That flood was even worse than Hurricane Katrina, and Hurricane Katrina was pretty awful. I don't understand why God had to drown the whole world and save only Noah and his family and a bunch of animals.

AARON

Because Noah and his family were the only righteous people in the eyes of God. Of all the people in the world, only Noah and his family believed in God.

JOSHUA

Just because people didn't believe in God was no reason to kill them.

AARON

The other people worshipped idols and didn't follow in God's ways.

JOSHUA

Like what?

AARON

For one thing, they engaged in child sacrifice. That's what they believed their idols demanded of them.

JOSHUA

How awful! But I don't think drowning people was the right thing for God to do. Actually, the story said that God was sorry for what He did. Remember? God promised He would never cause another great flood again.

AARON

Yes, He did promise that, as evidenced by the rainbow. Right you are.

JOSHUA

Sounds like even God sometimes makes mistakes.

AARON

If so, at least He admits His mistakes and learns from them. And that's an important lesson in itself.

ABRAHAM

There is nothing I want more than to walk in Your ways.

JOSHUA

Look, Dad, all this talk about the flood makes me thirsty. Can I go get something cold to drink?

AARON

Sure, but hurry back. We haven't even started on today's lesson.

ABRAHAM

Please speak to me, God!

JOSHUA gets up and runs out at stage right. AARON gets up, stands in front of the bookcase and looks through some of the books. After a while he looks at his watch and sits down in his seat.

AARON

Josh! *(AARON listens for an answer. Louder.)* Joshua!

JOSHUA comes in from stage right and quickly seats himself at the table.

JOSHUA

Sorry.

AARON

Okay. Let's read. Take it from Genesis, chapter 11, verse 10.

JOSHUA searches in his book, leafing back and forth. AARON helps him find the right page and points to the spot.

JOSHUA

"These are the generations of Shem."

AARON

Do you remember who Shem was?

JOSHUA

I forget.

AARON

He was one of Noah's three sons. Can you name the other two?

JOSHUA

Not really.

AARON

The others were Ham and Japhet. Do you know why Shem is particularly important to us?

JOSHUA

Why?

AARON

Because the Jewish people are descended from him. That's why we are called "Semites." The origin of the word "Semite" is "Shem."

ABRAHAM

Did I not leave my father's house and my homeland in Haran on Your command?

JOSHUA

Gotcha. ***"Shem was a hundred years old, and begot Arpa..."***

AARON

Arpachshad.

JOSHUA

"...and begot Arpachshad two years after the flood. And Shem lived after he begot Arpachshad five hundred years..."

AARON

Good. Please continue.

JOSHUA

Wait a minute! How could Shem live that long?

AARON

The story doesn't make that clear. We just have to accept it on faith.

JOSHUA

On faith? I thought you said I have to use my brain to think. Well, I'm thinking.

AARON

Balancing thinking and faith is not always easy, as we'll see later. Please continue.

JOSHUA

"And Arpachshad lived five and thirty years and begot Shelah. And Arpachshad lived after he begot Shelah four hundred and three years…"

AARON

Just read to yourself. Read till you get to Abraham.

ABRAHAM

Did I not take my wife Sarai and my nephew Lot and all my other household and go to the land You said You would show me?

JOSHUA

(Reading to himself.)

"And Shelah… begot Eber. And Shelah lived after he begot Eber four hundred and three years... And Eber… begot Peleg. And Eber lived after he begot Peleg four hundred and thirty years… And Peleg… begot Reu. And Peleg lived after he begot Reu two hundred and nine years… And Reu…begot Serug. And Reu lived after he begot Serug two hundred and seven years… And Serug… begot Nahor. And Serug lived after he begot Nahor two hundred years… And Nahor… begot Terah. And Nahor lived after he begot Terah a hundred and nineteen years… And Terah lived seventy years and begot Abraham…"

AARON

Pay attention, Josh. It says "Abram," not "Abraham." Only much later was Abram's name changed by God to "Abraham."

ABRAHAM

Did I not let You lead me to the Land of Canaan?

JOSHUA

What's the difference between the two names?

AARON

"Abram" means "great father," while "Abraham" means "father of many."

JOSHUA

I see. ***"Abram, Nahor and Haran."***

AARON

Olay. Stop. Let's review.

ABRAHAM

Did I not keep my faith in You even though the Land of Canaan was bare, with no water or food for my household?

JOSHUA

Oh man! Do you believe all this stuff?

AARON

What do you mean by "stuff"?

JOSHUA

How long all these guys lived.

AARON

I have no reason to doubt the biblical account.

JOSHUA

But how could they live that long? Even with the benefits of modern medicine, people can't live for hundreds of years, like these guys did. Maybe they just counted years differently in those days? Like maybe what they called "a year" was really what we call "a month"?

AARON

I don't know. On the whole, the age indicated for the fathers when their first children were born seems to correspond to normal human experience. So maybe the account is accurate.

JOSHUA

Or maybe God intervened to make each of these guys live for hundreds of years?

AARON

That is a possibility.

JOSHUA

Do you really believe that? Sounds like science fiction to me. And what's all the stuff about this one begot and that one begot? Why was it always men who begot? I thought women are the ones who bear children. How come the mothers aren't even mentioned? Maybe it was men who bore children in those days?

AARON

No. Even in those days it was women who bore the children. But, for purposes of procreation, women were considered - how shall I put it? - like the earth in which a seed is planted,

simply a container to provide nourishment for a man's seed during the nine months of gestation.

JOSHUA

So why do I have to learn this stuff? It's so bizarre!

AARON

It teaches you about our heritage. The way our ancestors thought is part of our heritage.

JOSHUA

Glad I'm not living in those days.

ABRAHAM

Did I not remain faithful to You even when I went down to Egypt with my household to avoid the drought in Canaan?

AARON

In some ways we've come a long way in our thinking since those days. The society to which all these ancestors of ours belonged considered men to be the more valued members of society. In America today things are different. Men and women are deemed equal.

JOSHUA

How long ago did these guys live, anyway?

AARON

Abraham lived about four thousand years ago.

JOSHUA

Four thousand? Phew!

AARON

Roughly speaking. Now tell me, Josh, how many generations were there from Noah to Abraham?

JOSHUA

How would I know?

ABRAHAM

And did I not trust in You while suffering through the indignity of having my beloved wife, Sarai, taken into the Pharaoh's house?

AARON

Please pay attention, Josh. Just look in your book and count them.

JOSHUA

(Counts on his fingers while looking in his book.)

Okay. Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah, Abram. Ten. Ten generations.

AARON

Excellent! Ten generations from Noah to Abraham. And do you know how many generations there were from Adam to Noah?

JOSHUA

Not really.

AARON

We discussed it a couple of weeks ago, when we learned about Noah.

JOSHUA

Oh, yeah, now I remember. Ten generations.

AARON

So how many generations were there between Adam and Abraham?

JOSHUA

Twenty.

AARON

Correct. There were twenty generations from Adam to Abraham. Actually, I wasn't questioning your mathematical ability. I just wanted to make sure you're paying attention. Now we're ready to turn to Abraham, who will be our main subject for the foreseeable future. He was called "Abram" in the beginning but, for purposes of discussion, we'll call him "Abraham," as God named him later and as he's been known in history. Why do you suppose Abraham is important in our people's history?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

ABRAHAM

And did You not hear my supplication and rescue Sarai from the Pharaoh's clutches by punishing Egypt with a plague?

AARON

First of all, he was one of the patriarchs.

JOSHUA

What does that mean?

AARON

A patriarch is a father-ruler, like the chief of a tribe. Only unlike in a tribe such as an Indian tribe, we are all supposedly descendants of this chief. Abraham is one of our ancestors.

JOSHUA

So learning about Abraham is like learning family history?! But Dad, do we have to start that far back? Four thousand years! We'll never be done.

AARON

We'll take it step by step. We have time.

JOSHUA

Oh jeez!

AARON

Okay. Let's read. Please start with Genesis, chapter 11, verse 27.

JOSHUA searches in his book, leafing back and forth. AARON helps him find the right page and points to the spot.

JOSHUA

"Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah begot Abraham..."

AARON

When you read, please read it as it says. It says "Abram."

ABRAHAM

God, have You forsaken me?

During the following, ABRAHAM gets up and begins gathering rocks and assembling them into an altar at upstage right. He places a layer of rocks on the ground, one rock next to another in a rectangular formation, then places a layer of rocks on top of the previous one and another on top of that one. Intermittently he stops and wipes his brow.

JOSHUA

"...Abram, Nahor and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur..."

AARON

Stop. Let's discuss it. Where did Abraham's family come from?

JOSHUA

It says from Ur.

AARON

Do you know where Ur is located?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

In Iraq.

JOSHUA

In Iraq? You mean the Iraq where the American troops were fighting?

AARON

Exactly.

JOSHUA

Why in the world would anyone want to live there?

AARON

It was a prosperous region. Ur was not far from the Euphrates River so there was an abundant water supply and there were trade routes nearby. It was a good place to live.

JOSHUA

I guess.

AARON

Now let's proceed. Does the text tell us whom Abraham married?

JOSHUA

(Looks in his book.)

It says, ***"The name of Abram's wife was Sarai…"***

AARON

And do you know what Sarai's name was changed to later?

JOSHUA

"Sarah"?

AARON

Excellent! God changed her name to "Sarah" at the same time He changed "Abram" into "Abraham." We can call her "Sarah" except when we are reading and it says "Sarai." And what one thing does the text tell us here about Sarah?

JOSHUA

(Searches in the text.)

"And Sarai was barren. She had no child."

AARON

Right. Abraham's wife, Sarah, had no child. That is an important thing to remember. It's a major factor in the Abraham saga, as you will find out. But let's go on. What does the text tell us next?

ABRAHAM, having gathered some rocks arranges them in a rectangular formation, then sits down on the ground,

seemingly exhausted. He sighs, wipes his brow, then gets up and stands on his knees near the arranged rocks and looks at the sky.

ABRAHAM

Please, God, give me the strength to finish building this altar for You.

ABRAHAM gets up and continues gathering and arranging rocks.

JOSHUA

(After reading to himself.)

Abraham's dad took Abraham and Sarah and their nephew Lot and they were heading for the Land of Canaan but when they came to a place called Haran they stayed there.

AARON

So they were first heading for the Land of Canaan. Do you know where that is?

JOSHUA

In Israel?

AARON

Well, the Land of Canaan included present-day Israel but it was much bigger than Israel is today. It included the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and even part, if not all of, what is now the Kingdom of Jordan.

JOSHUA

Really?

AARON

But they ended up in Haran. Do you know where Haran is?

JOSHUA

Not really.

AARON

In Turkey.

JOSHUA

Turkey? How did they get to Turkey?

AARON

If you look at a map, you'll see they probably followed the Euphrates River north from Ur and ended up in Turkey.

ABRAHAM

(Gathering rocks and building.)

Thank You, God, for giving me the strength to continue building an altar for You.

JOSHUA

So did they ever reach the Land of Canaan?

AARON

Terah died in Haran, but Abraham and Sarah and Lot did reach it. It happened years after they got to Haran. God appeared to Abraham one day and commanded him to leave Haran. Can you find the verse where God commanded Abraham to leave Haran? I think you'll find it further down, in chapter 12, the first verse. Please read it to me.

JOSHUA

"Now God said unto Abram: 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee.' "

AARON

Stop and read that sentence again, this time to yourself. It's very important.

JOSHUA

(Reading to himself.)

Okay.

AARON

What did God command Abraham to do?

JOSHUA

God told him to leave Haran and go to a land that God will show him.

AARON

So God asked Abraham to leave his father's house, to make a break with the past, and start on a new life. Now, when God told Abraham to leave Haran, did God mention he would lead Abraham to the Land of Canaan?

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

No.

AARON

Did God mention any specific place He would lead Abraham to?

JOSHUA

No.

AARON

Why is that important?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

Well, Abraham decided to follow God's command even though he didn't know where God would lead him. He didn't even question God about where He was going to lead him. Abraham simply obeyed God's command. Abraham had faith in God.

JOSHUA

Is that good? To obey without questioning?

AARON

It's something this story teaches us. To have unquestioning faith. Do you know why Abraham had left Ur before going to Haran in the first place?

JOSHUA

Because his Dad told him to?

AARON

The Torah doesn't explain, but there's a long oral tradition that says that in Ur, Abraham was persecuted for his belief in one God. All of Ur's people were idol worshippers and Abraham was the only one there who believed in one God. So Abraham left Ur for a place where he hoped to find greater freedom to pursue his faith, and he ended up, at least temporarily, in Haran.

JOSHUA

Like the Pilgrims coming to America.

AARON

Right.

ABRAHAM

(Gathering rocks and building.)

Thank You, God, for giving me the strength to continue building this altar for You.

JOSHUA

I think religious freedom is a good thing. Each person should believe what he wants to believe. And if he doesn't believe, he shouldn't have to.

AARON

I, too, believe in religious freedom. Now what does the Bible say next, after God commanded Abraham to leave Haran? Did God make any promises to Abraham? Read to yourself and tell me.

JOSHUA

(Studying his book.)

God said He will make Abraham into a great nation.

AARON

Excellent! What else?

JOSHUA

That Abraham will be a blessing to the whole world.

AARON

And what does the story tell us Abraham did after God gave him the command and made him these promises?

JOSHUA

Abraham took his wife and nephew and everyone and everything in his household and left Haran, like God commanded him to.

AARON

And how old was Abraham when he set out on his journey from Haran?

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

It says seventy-five. Pretty old.

AARON

And does it say whether Abraham eventually reached the Land of Canaan?

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

Yes. He did.

AARON

And where did he settle first?

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

A place called Shechem.

AARON

Do you know where that is?

JOSHUA

On the coast, near Tel Aviv?

AARON

No, Abraham didn't settle on the coast. Shechem is east of there, about half way between the coast and the Jordan River, in central Israel, in a valley between two mountains. Shechem was a commercial center due to its position in the middle of vital trade routes.

ABRAHAM sits down on the ground, seemingly exhausted. He sighs, then gets up on his knees near the arranged stones and looks at the sky. He wipes his brow, gets up and continues gathering rocks and building his altar.

ABRAHAM

I am almost done, God, just a few more rocks. Thank You for helping me do the job.

JOSHUA

Too bad. There's great swimming off Tel Aviv, remember?

AARON

Sure. We were all there together, the three of us, when you were little. I didn't know you still remember. You must have been no more than five years old.

JOSHUA

Of course I remember. Mom took me to the beach while you were at a conference.

AARON

Maybe some day the two of us will visit Israel again. Would you like that?

JOSHUA

Oh, yes! When can we go?

AARON

I'll figure something out. But for now, let's get back to the story. What was it that God told Abraham when he got to Shechem? Please find chapter 12, verse 7, and read it to me.

JOSHUA

"And God appeared unto Abram, and said: 'Unto thy seed will I give this land.' "

AARON

Stop. What does ***"unto thy seed"*** mean?

JOSHUA

To Abraham's children?

AARON

Right. To his children and to their children. To Abraham's descendants.

JOSHUA

But if Abraham left Haran when he was already seventy-five years old, could he still have children?

AARON

We'll find out later. The main thing to understand now is that God promised the Land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants.

JOSHUA

This is all pretty bizarre. How old was Abraham's wife if Abraham was seventy-five?

AARON

Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham, so she was sixty-five.

JOSHUA

If she was sixty-five, could she still have kids?

AARON

We'll see later. We don't want to anticipate too far ahead. It will spoil the suspense.

JOSHUA

Like in a mystery story?

AARON

Precisely.

ABRAHAM finishes building his altar. He looks at it and smiles, then gets on his knees and bows down. He gets up and begins gathering branches, which he places carefully inside the altar.

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

I have a question. It says, ***"God appeared unto Abram."*** What I want to know is how did God appear? Like a person?

AARON

It doesn't say.

JOSHUA

Maybe Abraham just imagined that God appeared?

AARON

It says, "***God appeared."***

JOSHUA

Maybe Abraham just heard a voice in his head?

AARON

We have to take the biblical account as it is given.

JOSHUA

But if he only heard a voice, how could Abraham be sure it was God's voice?

AARON

He just knew it was.

JOSHUA

Because he heard it before?

AARON

Yes.

JOSHUA

But how could he tell it was God's voice in the first place?

AARON

He just knew.

JOSHUA

Because he had faith?

AARON

Yes.

JOSHUA

(Pause.)

Hey, Dad. Did you ever hear voices?

AARON

No. I haven't.

JOSHUA

I haven't, either.

AARON

Well, let's continue with our story. Abraham did something very important after he heard God promising the Land of Canaan to his descendants. What did Abraham do? Read it to me. It's in chapter 12, a continuation of the same verse 7.

JOSHUA

"And he built there an altar unto God..."

AARON

Yes, he built an altar to sacrifice to God and thereby thank Him. And then Abraham moved to Beth El, south of Shechem. And what did he do there? Look at the next verse.

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

He built another altar. But Dad, how many altars did Abraham build?

ABRAHAM finishes gathering branches and placing them inside his altar. He stands on his knees and looks at the sky.

ABRAHAM

Dear God, thank You for allowing Your humble servant to build an altar for You. I will get a choice lamb for a burnt offering and sacrifice it. Maybe then You will appear to me again.

SARAH, having observed ABRAHAM, walks back through the tent and exits at stage left, followed by HAGAR.

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

A few weeks later. As the curtain rises, AARON and JOSHUA are seated at the table, as before, with their books open in front of them.

On the main stage, ABRAHAM is on his knees near the altar, with his head bowed. There is a black skeleton-like object on top of the altar, suggesting a burnt offering.

SARAH walks into the tent from stage left. She is followed by HAGAR. The two women walk past the pile of pillows to the tent doorway and survey the scene outside. Their eyes fall on ABRAHAM.

SARAH

He is still out there.

During the following exchange between SARAH and HAGAR, JOSHUA and AARON continue with their study session, whether through readings or discussion, but their words are inaudible to the audience.

HAGAR

True, my lady.

SARAH

Praying to his God.

HAGAR

Yes, my lady.

SARAH

What a persistent man!

HAGAR

A man of faith, my lady.

SARAH

When will it end?

HAGAR

I do not know, my lady.

SARAH

He still believes in his God's promise.

HAGAR

What promise, my lady?

SARAH

That the Land of Canaan will belong to his descendants.

HAGAR

A strange promise considering you are both advanced in age, my lady, and have no children.

SARAH

(Sighs.)

Yes, Hagar.

HAGAR

And you, my lady, beyond the child-bearing years.

SARAH

(Sighs.)

Yes, Hagar.

HAGAR

Your husband does not give up easily, my lady.

SARAH

His God keeps repeating the promise, despite the passage of years.

HAGAR

Do you believe in your husband's God, my lady?

SARAH

I have my doubts. And you?

HAGAR

I wonder if it is your husband's God or his own imagination that speaks to him, my lady.

SARAH

What do you mean?

HAGAR

Perhaps he wants a child so badly, my lady, that he imagines he is hearing his God promising one to him.

SARAH turns around and walks over to the pile of pillows. With HAGAR'S help, she arranges several pillows in a small pile on the floor of the tent and sits down, facing ABRAHAM. HAGAR pulls out a hand mirror and a brush from her pocket, hands the mirror to SARAH, and proceeds to brush SARAH'S hair.

AARON

Okay, Josh. What did we study last Sabbath?

JOSHUA

About how Abraham and his household went down to Egypt because of the famine in the Land of Canaan, and how when they came back Abraham and his nephew Lot parted

company and Lot went to live in Sodom, but Abraham went back to Beth El.

AARON

Do you remember where Sodom was?

JOSHUA

Near the Dead Sea.

AARON

Excellent! Now what does the story tell us about what happened when Abraham returned to Beth El?

JOSHUA

I don't remember.

AARON

Look at chapter 13, verses 14-17, and tell me.

JOSHUA

(Reading silently.)

Oh, yeah, now I remember. God told Abraham to look around him in all directions because God will give all the land which Abraham sees to his seed forever.

AARON

So God made the same promise to Abraham that He did before, namely, that the Land of Canaan would belong to Abraham's descendants. But what did God add this time? Read verse 16 aloud.

JOSHUA

"And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth; so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered."

AARON

Can you tell me in your own words what that means?

JOSHUA

That Abraham will have lots of descendants.

AARON

Excellent! Now what did Abraham do after he heard God's new promise?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

Read verse 18 to yourself and tell me.

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

Oh, yeah. Abraham moved to Hebron.

AARON

Do you know where Hebron is?

JOSHUA

Not exactly.

AARON

Further south. In other words, after arriving in the Land of Canaan, first Abraham lived in Shechem and then he moved south to Beth El and then he moved further south to Hebron.

JOSHUA

And in each place he built an altar to God. Even when he moved to Hebron it says, ***"and built there an altar unto God."***

AARON

Right.

JOSHUA

Why did Abraham need so many altars?

AARON

Because in each place he wanted to thank God by making a sacrifice to Him on an altar.

JOSHUA

Too bad they didn't have portable altars in those days.

AARON

What important lesson do we learn from this story?

JOSHUA

If they had portable altars, it would have saved Abraham a lot of work.

AARON

The lesson is that it's important to be grateful. Always remember that, Josh. To be grateful and to express one's gratitude. And what did we learn in chapter 15?

VOICE O.S.

Do not be afraid, Abram. Your reward will be great.

ABRAHAM

But God, what will You give me, considering that I am childless and my only heir is my servant Eliezer?

VOICE O.S.

No, that man will not be your heir.

ABRAHAM

But, God, You have given me no seed!

VOICE O.S.

Someone who comes out of your body will be your heir.

ABRAHAM

Oh, God! Can that be so?

VOICE O.S.

Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. That is how plentiful I will make your seed.

JOSHUA

(Turns some pages while studying his book.)

God again promised Abraham that he will have descendants.

AARON

Right.

JOSHUA

But this time it says, ***"... the word of God came to Abram in a vision."*** Does that mean God didn't actually appear to Abraham physically but only in Abraham's imagination, or even that only God's voice was heard by Abraham and Abraham didn't even see anything?

AARON

The text doesn't make it clear. The main thing is that God spoke to Abraham.

JOSHUA

Or maybe Abraham thought God spoke to him?

AARON

You have to take these things on faith. And did God describe the Land of Canaan to Abraham on that occasion?

JOSHUA

It says ***"...from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates..."***

AARON

Excellent! Let's go on to chapter 16. Just read the first verse to me.

JOSHUA

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children; and she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar." What's a handmaid?

AARON

A female slave.

JOSHUA

But how did Hagar become Sarah's slave?

AARON

The Bible doesn't tell us, but according to our oral tradition, Hagar was the Pharaoh's daughter and the Pharaoh gave Hagar to Sarah as a handmaid when Abraham and Sarah were in Egypt.

During the following exchange between SARAH and HAGAR, AARON and JOSHUA continue with their study session, but their words are inaudible to the audience.

SARAH

Perhaps Abram is not too old to have a child.

HAGAR

How so, my lady?

SARAH

He has not aged as I have.

HAGAR

That is the way of the world, my lady. We women age much faster than the men.

SARAH

My husband is still strong and vigorous.

HAGAR

I noticed, my lady.

SARAH

He still tries to have a child.

HAGAR

I know, my lady.

SARAH

I think I am the problem.

HAGAR

What do you mean, my lady?

SARAH

I am the barren one.

HAGAR

Abram loves you, my lady, barren or not.

SARAH

And I love him, too.

HAGAR

I know, my lady.

SARAH

And my fondest wish is to make my husband happy.

HAGAR

I noticed that, my lady.

SARAH

But what is a couple without a child?

HAGAR

A family without a future, my lady.

SARAH

My husband will never be happy without a child.

HAGAR

That seems to be true, my lady.

SARAH

And I want to make my husband happy.

HAGAR stops brushing SARAH'S hair. SARAH looks at herself in the mirror.

HAGAR

I have an idea, my lady.

SARAH

What is it, Hagar?

HAGAR

I know a way for you and Abram to have a child, my lady.

SARAH

After all these years!? How?

HAGAR

It is very simple, my lady.

SARAH

Really?

HAGAR

So simple I do not know why I never thought of it before, my lady.

SARAH

Tell me!

HAGAR

In all the years I have been serving you, it never crossed my mind before, my lady.

SARAH

What do you have in mind? Tell me already!

HAGAR

It involves me, my lady.

SARAH

You?

HAGAR

Am I not your handmaid, my lady?

SARAH

You certainly are, Hagar.

HAGAR

As your handmaid, do I not have to obey your every command, my lady?

SARAH

You certainly do.

HAGAR

What if you commanded me to go into your husband's tent at night, my lady?

SARAH

What are you saying?

HAGAR

To conceive his child, my lady.

SARAH

Am I hearing you correctly?

HAGAR

If I conceived and bore your husband's child, my lady…

SARAH

Yes?

HAGAR

The child would be yours, my lady.

SARAH

Go on.

HAGAR

As is the custom when a handmaid bears a child, my lady.

SARAH

Go on.

HAGAR

It is the mistress who is deemed to be the mother.

SARAH

Go on.

HAGAR

Not the handmaid, my lady.

SARAH

I see.

HAGAR

I would simply be the vessel in which your husband's seed grows, my lady.

SARAH

I see what you are saying.

HAGAR

After the child is born, I would nurse it until it was weaned, my lady.

SARAH

Of course, I could not.

HAGAR

But the child would be yours, my lady.

SARAH

Understood.

HAGAR

The child would call you "Mother," my lady, not me.

SARAH

And you, Hagar? What would you be?

HAGAR

Nothing, my lady, only the handmaid who gave the child birth.

SARAH

(Turns to look at HAGAR.)

It would be very difficult for me to do what you suggest, Hagar.

HAGAR

I know, my lady.

SARAH

I love my husband very much.

HAGAR

I am well aware of that, my lady.

SARAH

In all our years together, I have not strayed. Not once.

HAGAR

I know, my lady.

SARAH

Not even when we were in Egypt, rumors notwithstanding.

HAGAR

I know, my lady.

SARAH

Nor has he.

HAGAR

Your mutual love is clear as the night star, my lady.

SARAH

Our love has lasted all these many years.

HAGAR

I know, my lady.

SARAH

Through all these endless wanderings.

HAGAR

Yes, my lady.

SARAH

Through abundance and famine.

HAGAR

Yes, my lady.

SARAH

Through all the pain of childlessness.

HAGAR

I feel your pain, my lady.

SARAH

My husband and I have loved each other without reservation.

HAGAR

And all you want is to make your husband happy, as you said, my lady.

SARAH

True. How well you understand me, Hagar!

HAGAR

But, as you said, my lady, the only way to make your husband happy is to give him his own child.

SARAH

So it seems.

HAGAR

And having his own child would fulfill his God's promise to him, my lady.

SARAH

True. The child would be his seed.

HAGAR

And that is reason enough to allow me to help you, my lady.

SARAH

I hesitate. I am confused. I do not know what to do.

HAGAR

(Pause.)

This I promise you, my lady. As soon as I find out that I have conceived, I will no longer go into your husband's tent.

HAGAR resumes brushing SARAH'S hair while looking over at ABRAHAM. SARAH is lost in thought.

AARON

Please turn to chapter 16, verse 2, and read it to me aloud.

JOSHUA searches in his book, leafing back and forth. AARON helps him find the right page and points to the spot.

JOSHUA

"And Sarai said unto Abram: 'Behold now, God has restrained me from bearing; go in, I pray thee, unto my handmaid; it may be that I shall be built up through her...' "

On stage, SARAH gets up from her seat on the pillows, walks out of the tent and over to ABRAHAM, who is on his knees looking at the sky. When he notices her, ABRAHAM gets up and walks toward SARAH. He greets SARAH with a warm embrace, which she reciprocates. She whispers something in ABRAHAM'S ear, and he whispers something in hers. They go back and forth several times whispering to each other. HAGAR, in the tent, watches ABRAHAM and SARAH and smiles. After a while, still smiling, HAGAR exits at stage left.

AARON

Okay. Stop. Can you tell me in your own words what this section says?

JOSHUA

Sarah told Abraham that he should have a baby with Hagar.

AARON

And did Sarah tell Abraham why?

JOSHUA

Because she herself couldn't have children.

AARON

Excellent! And what does ***"I shall be built up through her"*** mean?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

It probably means that Sarah's reputation would recover, because for a married woman to have no children was considered shameful in the old days.

JOSHUA

But maybe it was Abraham who couldn't have children rather than Sarah. Too bad they didn't have fertility tests. Then Abraham and Sarah could both be tested.

AARON

In those days they assumed it was the wife's fault if a couple had no children.

JOSHUA

How bizarre!

AARON

So Sarah was hoping Hagar would bear Abraham's child.

JOSHUA

But wouldn't it be Hagar, not Sarah, who would be the mother of Abraham's child?

AARON

It was the rule that a slave's child belonged to the master or mistress. Hagar was Sarah's slave.

JOSHUA

Not Abraham's?

AARON

No. And don't forget that even in America, during slavery, a slave's child didn't belong to the slave but rather to the slave-owner.

JOSHUA

That's not fair! If Hagar had a baby, wouldn't it only be right to let her keep and mother her own child?

AARON

I agree it wasn't fair. And we have come a long way since then in our ideas of fairness. For one thing, we've done away with slavery.

JOSHUA

Can you imagine how Mom would have felt if she couldn't keep me?

AARON

(Pats JOSHUA'S head lovingly.)

Mom loved you very much. She wouldn't have given you up for anything. But let's go on. What does it say next? Please read it to me.

JOSHUA

"And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid... and gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife."

AARON

So Abraham did as Sarah suggested.

JOSHUA

Do you think maybe Abraham agreed because he fancied Hagar and this was his chance to hang out with her?

AARON

I'd like to think it wasn't lust but faith that made Abraham act the way he did. He probably thought that in view of Sarah's age, there was no other way for God's promise that his seed would inherit the Land of Canaan to be fulfilled.

JOSHUA

You really believe Abraham hung out with Hagar just because of his faith?

AARON

I do.

JOSHUA

Hah! And do you think it was Sarah's idea to have Abraham and Hagar get together? Or was it Hagar's?

AARON

What do you think?

JOSHUA

I'll bet it was Hagar's idea.

AARON

Why do you think so?

JOSHUA

(Glancing over his left shoulder at the main stage.)

Oh, I don't know. I think Hagar fancied Abraham, just like he did her.

AARON

The Bible doesn't tell us who first came up with the idea, but you may be right. Now let's continue. Did Hagar become pregnant?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

Look at verse 4. What does it say?

JOSHUA

It says, ***"... and she conceived."***

AARON

Excellent! That means she got pregnant. And what happened after Hagar became pregnant with Abraham's baby? Please read the rest of verse 4 to me.

JOSHUA

"... and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes."

On stage, SARAH is standing next to ABRAHAM, whispering in his ear. HAGAR, visibly pregnant, walks out of the tent and circles haughtily around the couple. SARAH and ABRAHAM go back and forth several times whispering to each other. Intermittently each stares at HAGAR, who smiles at ABRAHAM but frowns at SARAH.

AARON

So after Hagar became pregnant, things didn't go as smoothly as Abraham and Sarah expected.

JOSHUA

Serves them right. Using Hagar for their own purposes!

AARON

What did Sarah tell Abraham about the situation? Read chapter 16, verse 5, and tell me in your own words.

JOSHUA

(Reading in his book.)

She told Abraham it was all his fault that Hagar became so uppity after she got pregnant.

AARON

And what did Abraham say to Sarah after she blamed him for the situation? Read verse 6 aloud.

JOSHUA

"... But Abram said to Sarai: 'Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her that which is good in thine eyes...' "

AARON

Stop. So what did Abraham say? Did he try to lay blame on Sarah, as Sarah did on him?

JOSHUA

No, he didn't. But he seemed to blame Hagar, because he said to Sarah that she could punish Hagar if she wished. And then it says that Sarah did.

AARON

Don't forget that Hagar was still Sarah's slave, pregnant or not.

JOSHUA

If I was in Hagar's shoes, I would have run away. Like some slaves did in America.

Lighting on the main stage is dimmed. ABRAHAM and SARAH exit through the tent at stage left, and HAGAR, near center stage, is illuminated. She looks in all directions, as if trying to get her bearings. As she walks back and forth on stage, seeking the direction she should follow, it is evident that she is big with child. She walks with difficulty, over and around the rocks and branches that litter the ground, toward the center of the downstage area. She stumbles as she walks, and eventually falls, seemingly exhausted, to the ground. She sobs.

HAGAR

I was so loyal to Sarai! I offered to suffer the discomfort of pregnancy for her. And the pain of childbirth. And to bear a child for her just so the promise of her husband's God would be fulfilled. And how did she repay me, that barren woman? With jealousy! Yes, it was jealousy that made her abuse me. Womanly jealousy, nothing less. And during my pregnancy, too! She made me so upset that sometimes I wondered if she wanted me to lose the baby. If only Abram saw how she mistreated me, he would have put an end to the abuse. He is so kind and gentle. He appreciated my sacrifice on behalf of his wife. I cannot help loving that man. Oh, Abram! Where are you when I need you? And where is your God?

VOICE O.S.

Hagar! Where are you going?

HAGAR

(Looking around for the source of the voice.)

Who are you?

VOICE O.S.

I am Abram's God.

HAGAR

Oh?! I am fleeing from my mistress.

VOICE O.S.

Return to your mistress, Hagar, and submit yourself to her.

HAGAR

Why should I? She has mistreated me.

VOICE O.S.

Look, Hagar, you are pregnant with a child.

HAGAR

Do You think I am not aware of it?

VOICE O.S.

You will bear a son.

HAGAR

A son!

VOICE O.S.

And you will name your son "Ishmael" – God will hear – because God has heard your suffering.

HAGAR

(Sitting up and wiping the tears off her face.)

Ishmael!

VOICE O.S.

And through Ishmael I will greatly multiply your descendants, so they could not even be counted.

HAGAR

(Looks up at the sky, her face brightened with a smile.)
You are the God of Seeing, because you saw me! Maybe Abram's God exists after all!

HAGAR gets up, brushes herself off, and heads back to where she came from, toward center stage. Although the ground is littered with rocks and branches, she walks with great assurance and speed, a smile on her face. When she reaches her destination, ABRAHAM and SARAH run out of the tent toward her to greet her, each hugging her in turn.

AARON

And what happened next? Please read chapter 16, verse 15, to yourself and tell me.

JOSHUA

(Reading to himself.)
Hagar had a baby boy and Abraham named him "Ishmael."

AARON

And how old was Abraham when Ishmael was born? It tells you in the next verse.

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)
Eighty six years old! Do you believe this stuff?

AARON

That's what the Bible tells us. But then, the Bible skips the first thirteen years of Ishmael's life. It goes on to tell us what happened when Abraham was ninety-nine years old.

JOSHUA

Why does it skip the important part? I would have liked to know more about how Ishmael grew up. Did he consider Sarah his real mother?

AARON

The Bible doesn't say, but I can't imagine why Ishmael wouldn't have considered Sarah to be his real mother, although he may have been told that Hagar was his birth mother. I would assume both Abraham and Sarah loved Ishmael with all their hearts. After all, they had waited for decades to have a child. What do you think, Josh?

JOSHUA

I agree. I can just imagine little Ishmael being cuddled by Abraham and Sarah, and by Hagar, too. Actually Ishmael had three parents, and among them two mothers. How wonderful that must have been! I still remember when Mom was around.

AARON

(Patting JOSHUA lovingly on the head.)

Your mother loved you very much.

JOSHUA

I'm sure Hagar didn't stop loving Ishmael just because of some silly rules about children born to slaves.

AARON

You're probably right. But then look at what happened when Ishmael was thirteen years old.

JOSHUA

What?

AARON

See chapter 17, verses 15-16. Please read them aloud.

JOSHUA

"And God said unto Abraham: 'As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.'"
What's the difference between "Sarai" and "Sarah"?

AARON

"Sarai" means "princess" but "Sarah" means "queen."

JOSHUA

So the princess became a queen?

AARON

Right. Now read verse 16 to yourself and tell me what it says.

JOSHUA

(Reading to himself.)
God told Abraham that Sarah will have her own baby. But, Dad, is that possible? If Ishmael is 13, then Abraham, who was 86 when Ishmael was born, must be 99, and since you told me Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham, she must be 89, so she probably won't have a baby till she's 90. Can a 90 year old woman have a baby?

AARON

According to this story she can.

JOSHUA

This is incredible!

AARON

That's what Abraham thought, too.

At center stage, ABRAHAM is on his knees, bowing. SARAH is standing in the tent watching ABRAHAM.

VOICE O.S.

I will bless Sarah.

ABRAHAM

But God, You have already blessed us more than we deserve.

VOICE O.S.

I will give you a son by her.

ABRAHAM

You will give me a son by Sarah?!

VOICE O.S.

Yes, by your wife, Sarah.

ABRAHAM

Thank You, God, but how is that possible?

VOICE O.S.

For God, all things are possible.

ABRAHAM

Can a ninety-year old woman bear a child?

VOICE O.S.

If God wills it she can.

ABRAHAM

(Falls on his face and laughs.)

Ha-Ha-Ha!

SARAH

(In the tent, joins in Abraham's laughter.)

Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha!

VOICE O.S.

And you will call Sarah's son "Isaac."

ABRAHAM

Why should I call Sarah's son "Isaac"?

VOICE O.S.

Because you laughed when you heard that Sarah will bear you a son.

ABRAHAM

Because I laughed? I laughed because what You say is laughable. And I heard Sarah laughing, too. Who would not laugh upon hearing that a ninety year old woman will bear a child?

VOICE O.S.

I will establish my covenant with Isaac and his seed forever.

ABRAHAM

But what will become of my beloved son, Ishmael?

VOICE O.S.

Don't worry. I will bless and multiply Ishmael and he will become a great nation.

SARAH, still laughing, emerges from the tent and walks toward ABRAHAM. He gets up when he hears her footsteps and they embrace, then walk together hand in hand into the tent and exit at stage left.

AARON

And did you read something about God's covenant in chapter 17?

JOSHUA

I read about how God told Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household as a sign of God's covenant with him. And they were all circumcised on the same day.

AARON

Excellent!

JOSHUA

Does that mean that Abraham was circumcised when he was ninety-nine years old?

AARON

So we're told. And how old was Ishmael when he was circumcised?

JOSHUA

Thirteen.

AARON

Excellent!

JOSHUA

Oh jeez! That's gross!

AARON

Please, Joshua! Circumcision is our covenant with God. It's been our covenant for four thousand years. Please try to show it more respect.

JOSHUA

Phew!

AARON

Okay. Let's move on. How about chapter 18? Did you get the essence of the story about the three strangers whom Abraham invited to his tent?

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

Yes, they brought a message from God that Sarah would have a baby.

AARON

And what mission were they going on when they left Abraham?

JOSHUA

To destroy Sodom because of its wickedness.

AARON

That's a very important story. What did Abraham say when he heard that God was planning to destroy Sodom? Read chapter 18, verses 23-24, to me.

JOSHUA

(Leafing through his book, then stopping and reading.)

"And Abraham drew near, and said: 'Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? If there are fifty righteous within the city, wilt Thou indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are within?' "

AARON

Stop. What was Abraham doing?

JOSHUA

He was arguing with God about whether God should destroy Sodom. He was probably worried about his nephew Lot. Didn't Lot live in Sodom?

AARON

He did. But Abraham was doing more than that. What was he challenging?

JOSHUA

He was challenging God's idea of justice.

AARON

Excellent! How did Abraham do that?

JOSHUA

Abraham argued that the city should not be destroyed if there were fifty righteous people in it.

ABRAHAM emerges from the tent and walks toward center stage. He gets on his knees and bows, then looks at the sky.

AARON and JOSHUA continue with their lesson. Their words are inaudible to the audience.

ABRAHAM

What if You find fifty righteous people in Sodom? Will You still destroy the city?

VOICE O.S.

If I find fifty righteous people within the city of Sodom, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.

ABRAHAM

And what if five are lacking from the fifty righteous ones? Will You destroy the city because five are lacking?

VOICE O.S.

I will not destroy it if I find there forty five.

ABRAHAM

What if there are forty innocent ones there?

VOICE O.S.

I will not destroy the city, for the forty's sake.

ABRAHAM

What if thirty righteous people are found there?

VOICE O.S.

I will not do it if I find thirty there.

ABRAHAM

What if there are twenty righteous people found in Sodom?

VOICE O.S.

I will not destroy the city for the twenty's sake.

ABRAHAM

Please do not be angry. I know I am only dust and ashes. But God, what if only ten righteous people are found there?

VOICE O.S.

Then I will not destroy Sodom.

ABRAHAM

Thank You, God! You are indeed a God of justice!

ABRAHAM bows and returns to the tent, then exits at stage left.

AARON

Abraham's idea of justice was quite advanced for his time. He didn't believe that the innocent should be punished with the guilty. Nor do we today.

JOSHUA

But why did he stop challenging God when he reached ten righteous people? Why didn't he challenge God for wanting to destroy the city if there was even one innocent person there?

AARON

Good question. Actually, in the Jewish tradition, even one innocent life is worth saving. Did you ever hear the expression, ***"Saving a single person is like saving the whole world"?***

JOSHUA

Yes, I think it was in Schindler's List. But did God end up destroying Sodom?

AARON

He did.

JOSHUA

You mean God couldn't even find ten innocent people there?

AARON

Apparently not.

JOSHUA

How many innocent people do you think there were in Sodom?

AARON

According to the story, only four: Lot and his wife and their two daughters.

JOSHUA

And what happened to them?

AARON

God let them escape from Sodom. But if you want to know the whole story of Lot's escape, read chapter 19, verses 15-26. Maybe we can discuss it next Sabbath.

JOSHUA leafs through his book, then finds the correct spot and begins reading silently to himself, as does AARON.

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

A couple of weeks have passed. As the curtain rises, AARON and JOSHUA enter together from stage right and seat themselves at the table, as before, then open the books in front of them.

AARON

Do you remember what we studied last Sabbath? It was the beginning of chapter 21 of Genesis.

ABRAHAM and ISHMAEL enter the tent from stage left, then walk through it and emerge through the tent doorway. They walk over to the altar upstage.

ABRAHAM

Listen to me carefully, Ishmael. I am going to teach you about sacrificing to God. You are now old enough to understand how to thank God properly for all His blessings.

ISHMAEL

I am listening, Father.

ABRAHAM

First you fetch a choice lamb.

ISHMAEL

Why does it need to be a choice one?

ABRAHAM

God wants and deserves the best, my son.

ISHMAEL

But what does "the best" mean?

ABRAHAM

What we value the most.

ISHMAEL

And what is that?

ABRAHAM

Here is an example, Ishmael. Of all the lambs I have given you, do you have a favorite lamb?

ISHMAEL

Of course I do. The white one.

ABRAHAM

Well, if you make a sacrifice to God, it is the white one that you have to sacrifice.

ISHMAEL

But why, Father, would I have to sacrifice a lamb I love so much?

ABRAHAM

Because then God knows that you are willing to give up something that is very dear to you. Giving up what is very dear to you is what makes it a sacrifice.

ISHMAEL

Oh!

ABRAHAM

Let us do it, Ishmael, so you will always remember that God wants and deserves the best we have. Go get your white lamb and bring it to the altar so you can sacrifice it to God to thank Him for all He has done for you. I will show you how to bind your white lamb and how to place it on the altar and burn it.

ISHMAEL

Oh!

ISHMAEL stares at ABRAHAM, tears in his eyes, then hesitantly walks to the tent, enters it and exits it at stage left.

ABRAHAM

(Calling after ISHMAEL.)

I will get the strings and the knife and the fire, and meet you back at the altar!

ABRAHAM walks upstage, where he exits.

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

We studied that Isaac was born and was weaned, and that Sarah and Abraham made a big feast to celebrate the occasion.

ABRAHAM, SARAH, HAGAR and ISHMAEL enter the tent from stage left and begin celebrating. They dance while playing musical instruments. ABRAHAM intermittently blows the horn, while SARAH and HAGAR play the cymbal and ISHMAEL plays the flute. Suddenly, ABRAHAM stops playing, hands his horn to ISHMAEL and exits the tent. Outside, he goes down on his knees and looks up at the sky.

ABRAHAM

Thank You God, for bringing us to this happy day! Isaac is now weaned. He is a strong boy. We could not have done it without Your help!

In the tent, SARAH stops dancing and playing, hands her cymbal to HAGAR, and walks toward the tent doorway. For a moment she stands there, watching ABRAHAM, then walks

out toward him. ABRAHAM gets up when he hears SARAH'S footsteps. They embrace.

SARAH

(Looking up at the sky.)

Please forgive me, God, for doubting You for so many years, while Abraham kept on believing in what seemed unbelievable. Now that I have born Isaac, and now that he is weaned, I know it could not have been done without You. Thank You, God, for giving Abraham and me a son and for bringing us to this joyous day!

SARAH and ABRAHAM embrace again.

ABRAHAM

My dear Sarah, I love you all the more for sharing my faith.

SARAH

Your faith is true, Abraham. It took me years, but I finally realized it. Without God's help, how could an old, barren woman conceive and give birth to a son?

ABRAHAM

Yes, Sarah. And, because of your own faith, soon God may appear to you, as He has to me.

SARAH

I will then thank Him again and personally. But how will I know it is God who is appearing to me? What does God look like? Does He always appear the same?

ABRAHAM

No, Sarah. God appears differently at different times. But His voice never changes. You will recognize Him by His voice.

SARAH

What does His voice sound like?

ABRAHAM

You will know it when you hear it.

SARAH

But, Abraham, how would I be able to recognize it? I have never heard it!

ABRAHAM

For one thing, it is a male voice.

SARAH

But there are many male voices. How would I know that it is the right one?

ABRAHAM

You will know, Sarah. Trust me.

SARAH

I cannot see how, Abraham. Please let me hear you imitate it.

ABRAHAM

No, Sarah. God might consider it presumptuous of me.

SARAH

He would not do anything of the sort, Abraham. You told me yourself that God is all-knowing. So God knows how unassuming and God-fearing you are.

ABRAHAM

I am certainly God-fearing.

SARAH

But if you do not let me know what God's voice sounds like, there is a danger that I might not recognize it as God's voice when He speaks to me. And then, if He orders me to do something and I do not, or if He orders me not to do something and I do, I would be disobeying Him.

ABRAHAM

(Pause.)

I would not want you to disobey God because of my failure, Sarah. That would be as if I myself disobeyed Him. Therefore, I will try to imitate God's voice for you so you can obey God when you hear His voice. Please listen carefully so you can always remember what God's voice sounds like.

As the VOICE O.S. is heard during the following exchange, ABRAHAM'S lips move as if he himself is speaking.

VOICE O.S.

Sarah! Can you hear Me?

SARAH

Yes, I can!

VOICE O.S.

I am your God.

SARAH

I hear You!

VOICE O.S.

Will you recognize God's voice when you hear it again?

SARAH

I will! I will never forget it! Thank you, Abraham!

SARAH and ABRAHAM embrace and kiss, then walk hand-in-hand back into the tent and rejoin the festivities, dancing and playing their musical instruments in the company of HAGAR and ISHMAEL.

AARON

And what did Ishmael do at the feast? It tells us in chapter 21, verse 9.

JOSHUA

(Looking in his book.)

It says that Ishmael was ***"making sport"*** of Isaac.

Suddenly, ISHMAEL stops and, still holding his flute, walks over to the pile of pillows and disappears behind it. After a moment or two, SARAH stops and follows ISHMAEL. She looks behind the pile of pillows, then disappears in back of the pile. SARAH is heard screaming.

AARON

What do you suppose ***"making sport"*** means?

JOSHUA

Ishmael was kidding Isaac?

AARON

Scholars have not been able to agree on the meaning of ***"making sport."*** Some have suggested that Ishmael was mocking Isaac.

JOSHUA

Maybe Ishmael was jealous of all the attention Isaac was getting. I don't blame him.

AARON

You may be right. At any rate Ishmael did something to Isaac that made Sarah furious. In view of Sarah's strong reaction, some scholars have even suggested that Ishmael may have engaged in sexually abusing his little brother.

JOSHUA

Maybe Sarah just used whatever Ishmael did as an excuse to complain to Abraham.

AARON

That's possible.

JOSHUA

Because once she had Isaac, she did a one eighty, because she didn't feel a need for Ishmael any longer. Poor Ishmael! His mother Sarah stopped loving him. That's so sad, it's pathetic.

AARON

So what does verse 10 tell us Sarah said to Abraham? Please read it silently to yourself and tell me.

JOSHUA reads to himself, as does AARON. At the sound of SARAH'S scream, ABRAHAM and HAGAR stop playing and dancing.

SARAH

(Calling from behind the pile of pillows.)

Hagar! Come here at once!

HAGAR

Coming, my lady!

HAGAR dutifully hurries and disappears behind the pile of pillows. After a moment, HAGAR and ISHMAEL exit at stage

left. SARAH emerges from behind the pile of pillows, walks over to ABRAHAM, who is now standing alone in the tent, seemingly perplexed, and grabs him by the arm. Startled, he drops his horn. SARAH quickly leads him out of the tent to center stage.

ABRAHAM

What is it, Sarah?

SARAH

I want you to cast out Hagar and Ishmael!

ABRAHAM

What do you mean when you say "cast them out"?

SARAH

What do you think I mean? Kick them out!

ABRAHAM

But why, Sarah, why?

SARAH

I have had enough of them.

ABRAHAM

I do not understand. Hagar has been your faithful handmaid all these years.

SARAH

It is time for her to go, and to take her son with her.

ABRAHAM

But Ishmael is your son. He calls you "Mother."

SARAH

That is irrelevant. Hagar and Ishmael simply have to go.

ABRAHAM

But what have they done?

SARAH

Ishmael has made sport of Isaac.

ABRAHAM

Has made sport? What do you mean?

SARAH

Actually, whatever Ishmael has done pales in comparison to the fact that he stands to share in your wealth, and I will not allow it.

ABRAHAM

But Sarah, surely there is plenty for both our sons. God has blessed us with many riches. There is no reason why one of our sons should be deprived of my worldly goods for the sake of the other.

SARAH

I have to defend Isaac's rights. He and he alone is my son.

ABRAHAM

What are you saying, Sarah? For more than thirteen years Ishmael was your only son. You were his mother, and no son was ever more loved by his mother than Ishmael was by you.

SARAH

Ishmael is Hagar's son, not mine.

ABRAHAM

And he is my son, too, and I love him.

SARAH

Does that mean you refuse to cast Hagar and Ishmael out?

ABRAHAM

Much as I love you, Sarah, I cannot do what you ask of me. It would not be right. God would never condone it.

SARAH walks angrily into the tent and exits at stage left.

JOSHUA

Sarah wanted to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael so Ishmael wouldn't get any of Abraham's property. But that wasn't fair to Ishmael, because he was Abraham's son and should get some of Abraham's stuff if Abraham wants to give it to him.

AARON

And how did Abraham feel about what Sarah said? Read verse 11 to me.

JOSHUA

It says, ***"And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight..."***

AARON

So what did Abraham do? Please read verse 12 to yourself and tell me.

JOSHUA reads to himself, as does AARON.

VOICE O.S.

Do not be upset, Abraham.

ABRAHAM, standing at center stage, looks all around him, then falls to his knees and looks up at the sky.

ABRAHAM

How can I not be upset? Sarah wants me to cast out my son Ishmael!

VOICE O.S.

I know.

ABRAHAM

And she wants me to cast out Hagar!

VOICE O.S.

I know. I heard what Sarah said to you. But do not worry.

ABRAHAM

How can I not worry? I love Sarah but I love Ishmael too, and Hagar…

VOICE O.S.

You have to do what Sarah tells you to do. You have to listen to your wife.

ABRAHAM

Oh, my God! What will happen to my son?

VOICE O.S.

Your son Isaac will carry your seed.

ABRAHAM

But what about Ishmael? He is my son, too!

VOICE O.S.

Do not worry. I will make Ishmael into a nation because he is your seed.

ABRAHAM falls down to the ground and sobs.

JOSHUA

It's hard to believe that God would ask Abraham to kick out his son.

AARON

But God did.

JOSHUA

I don't understand. Why didn't Abraham challenge God, the way he did when God was planning to destroy Sodom? Do you remember how Abraham challenged God's justice? Wasn't God being unjust now, when he told Abraham to kick Ishmael out? So why didn't Abraham challenge Him? The story itself says that Abraham's own sense of justice made him feel that kicking Ishmael out was a wrong thing to do.

AARON

Why do you suppose Abraham didn't challenge God's justice this time?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

Think, Joshua! That's what God gave us a brain for. To think. This story has a moral to it. What do you suppose the story teaches us?

JOSHUA

That God is unjust?

AARON

I don't think so.

JOSHUA

That a man should always listen to his wife, no matter what?

AARON

I don't think so.

JOSHUA

That a father should kick his son out for no good reason?

AARON

No. The story tells us something important about Abraham.

JOSHUA

That Abraham really didn't love Ishmael but only pretended to?

AARON

On the contrary. Abraham loved Ishmael very much. That's the whole point. What the story tells us is that Abraham was willing to give up one of his two sons, both of whom he cherished, if God asked him to.

JOSHUA

So what's that supposed to prove?

AARON

It shows that Abraham had increasing faith in God. He no longer undertook to argue with God or challenge Him in any way. Abraham no longer relied on his own reason and sense

of justice. Abraham was turning more and more away from reason toward faith.

JOSHUA

(Pause.)

Dad, I want to ask you something.

AARON

What is it, Josh?

JOSHUA

Would you ever kick me out?

AARON

Of course not.

JOSHUA

Even if God told you to?

AARON

God has never spoken to me, and I doubt He ever will.

JOSHUA

But what if He did?

AARON

I still wouldn't.

JOSHUA

How come?

AARON

It wouldn't be reasonable to kick you out. And I'm a rational man.

JOSHUA

Not a man of faith?

AARON

I'm also a man of faith.

JOSHUA

I guess you don't have as much faith as Abraham did, huh? You don't have enough faith to suspend your own reason and your own sense of justice?

AARON

Right. You have to realize, Josh, that abandoning reason altogether in favor of faith is one of the most difficult things in the world to do. And Abraham was able to do it. I'm afraid I'm not.

JOSHUA

Phew!

AARON

Well, let's go on. What does the story tell us Abraham did after God told him to listen to Sarah and cast Ishmael out? Please read verse 14 to me.

JOSHUA

"And Abraham arose up early in the morning, and took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away, and she departed, and strayed in the wilderness of Beer Sheba."
Where is Beer Sheba?

AARON

South of Hebron. Hebron was where Abraham was living at the time.

JOSHUA

Maybe Hagar was heading south toward Egypt, where she came from. Maybe she still had a family there.

AARON

Probably.

ABRAHAM rises and walks into and through the tent. He exits at stage left, and, after a while, reenters, carrying two loaves of bread and two containers of water. He walks through the tent toward the tent doorway, followed by HAGAR and ISHMAEL. He stops and puts the provisions in HAGAR'S and ISHMAEL'S shoulder bags, hugs HAGAR, and whispers in her ear. She hugs him back and bursts into tears. ABRAHAM then turns to ISHMAEL and they embrace for a long moment. Both are sobbing.

ISHMAEL

I do not want to leave you, Father.

ABRAHAM

I wish you did not have to, Ishmael.

IHMAEL

I love you, Father.

ABRAHAM

I love you too, Ishmael. I love you very, very much.

ISHMAEL

So why do I have to leave?

ABRAHAM

It is God's will.

ISHMAEL

How do you know?

ABRAHAM

God spoke to me.

ISHMAEL

You always taught me that God is just!

ABRAHAM

He is.

ISHMAEL

If God is just, how can He be so unjust as to tell a loving father to send his loving son away?

ABRAHAM

We cannot question God's justice.

ISHMAEL

But, Father! You once did. You yourself told me the story of Sodom and how God wanted to destroy the city and how you challenged God's justice then.

ABRAHAM

I have come to realize that God has His own idea of justice, which man may not comprehend. A man of faith must simply obey.

ISHMAEL

Oh, Father!

ISHMAEL bursts into tears. ABRAHAM, sobbing, embraces ISHMAEL and kisses him on the cheek. ISHMAEL kisses ABRAHAM back, then walks away with his head bowed and

joins HAGAR. As HAGAR and ISHMAEL go out of the tent and depart toward stage right, ABRAHAM follows for a few *steps, then breaks down, crying. He then turns around and walks slowly through the tent, exiting at stage left.*

JOSHUA

So what happened to Hagar and to Ishmael?

AARON

Please read chapter 21, verses 15-20, to yourself and tell me in your own words.

JOSHUA reads to himself, as does AARON.

HAGAR and ISHMAEL pace this way and that on stage, trying to find their bearings. They intermittently wipe off their brows and drink from their water containers until these are empty. ISHMAEL fans himself with his hand, then removes his robe and discards it. HAGAR and ISHMAEL keep pacing back and forth, seemingly lost, and ISHMAEL eventually falls to the ground. He cries in agony, then appears unconscious. HAGAR drags him to a shady spot under the bush downstage. She then sits at some distance from him and looks away.

HAGAR

(Weeping.)

Oh, God of Abraham! Let me not witness the death of the child!

VOICE O.S.

What is the matter, Hagar? I heard your voice calling Me.

HAGAR

My child, Abraham's child, is dying!

VOICE O.S.

I heard the child's voice, too.

HAGAR

Please do not let him die!

VOICE O.S.

Do not worry. Just lift him up and hold him.

HAGAR gets up and begins walking toward ISHMAEL. She notices the well nearby and, stopping, she fills a container with the well water and brings it to ISHMAEL to drink. ISHMAEL drinks and is revived. HAGAR helps him up onto his feet and holds him, and when he seems stable on his feet, she fetches his robe, which ISHMAEL puts on. HAGAR goes down on her knees and looks at the sky.

HAGAR

Thank You, God of Abraham, for letting Ishmael live! From now on, You are not only Abraham's God. You are also my God and the God of Ishmael!

HAGAR and ISHMAEL stop by the well, fill up their containers with water, then walk toward stage right and exit.

JOSHUA

It says Hagar and Ishmael got lost in the desert but God saved them.

AARON

Right. And then we are told that Ishmael dwelled in the desert, and his mother picked an Egyptian wife for him.

JOSHUA

I'll bet Ishmael still missed his father even after getting married.

AARON

I wouldn't be surprised.

JOSHUA

And I'll bet Abraham missed Ishmael, too.

AARON

I'm sure he did.

JOSHUA

And I'll bet Abraham was mad at Sarah for making him send Ishmael away.

AARON

Probably.

JOSHUA

And I'll bet Abraham could never forgive Sarah for what she did.

AARON

Forgiveness is difficult. But it's an important thing to do. Not just for the person who is forgiven but for the one who forgives. I hope you never forget that, Josh. Now let's go on to Genesis, chapter 22. Please read the first two verses to yourself and tell me what they say.

JOSHUA reads to himself, as does AARON.

ABRAHAM walks into the tent from stage left, places some pillows near the tent's doorway, and sits down on the pillows,

looking out He gets up and walks out of the tent, looking around as if searching for someone, then goes back into the tent and resumes his seat by the tent's doorway.

VOICE O.S.

Abraham!

ABRAHAM

(Rushing out of the tent and looking at the sky.)

Here I am.

VOICE O.S.

Take your son, your only son…

ABRAHAM

But I have two sons, Ishmael and Isaac.

VOICE O.S.

Take the son you love…

ABRAHAM

But I love both of my sons!

VOICE O.S.

Take Isaac.

ABRAHAM

Isaac?

VOICE O.S.

Yes, and go to the Land of Moriah.

ABRAHAM

It is quite a distance from here.

VOICE O.S.

I know.

ABRAHAM

And what should I do when I get to the Land of Moriah?

VOICE O.S.

Offer Isaac there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.

ABRAHAM falls to his knees and bows, then gets up and walks into the tent, exiting at stage left. He reenters the tent a while later, carrying a small container with a flame in it. ISAAC follows him, carrying a stack of branches. ABRAHAM and ISAAC walk through the tent and emerge, then proceed to walk from center stage to downstage. They walk side by side.

JOSHUA

God told Abraham to take Isaac to the Land of Moriah and offer Isaac there as a burnt offering to God.

AARON

Excellent!

JOSHUA

Seriously, Dad. These Bible stories are getting weirder by the minute!

AARON

Why do you say that?

JOSHUA

First God told Abraham to send Ishmael away, and now God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Well, Abraham only had two kids, and the thing he wanted most in the whole wide world

was to have kids. So why wouldn't God just leave him alone and let him keep Isaac?

AARON

Maybe God did. But we don't want to anticipate and spoil the suspense. What does it tell us in chapter 22, verse 3, about what Abraham did?

JOSHUA

(Reading silently.)

It says Abraham rose early in the morning to start on his journey to the Land of Moriah.

AARON

Why do you suppose Abraham rose early?

JOSHUA

He probably wanted to sneak away before Sarah woke up, so she wouldn't find out what he was up to.

AARON

Or maybe he was just eager to obey God's command without delay.

JOSHUA

So what happened when they finally got to the Land of Moriah?

AARON

God showed Mount Moriah to Abraham, and Abraham and Isaac climbed it. Do you know where Mount Moriah is?

JOSHUA

In Israel.

AARON

But where in Israel?

JOSHUA

I forget.

AARON

Mount Moriah is what is known as the "Temple Mount." It's where King Solomon's Temple once stood and where the Western Wall still stands, in Jerusalem.

JOSHUA

But did Abraham tell Isaac that he was planning to kill him?

AARON

Read chapter 22, verse 7, to yourself and tell me what it says.

JOSHUA reads to himself, as does AARON.

ABRAHAM and ISAAC walk side by side silently.

ISAAC

My Father!

ABRAHAM

Here I am, Isaac.

ISAAC

Father, I can see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

ABRAHAM

God will Himself provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.

ABRAHAM and ISAAC continue walking side by side silently, until they reach downstage. They proceed to build an altar, using the large rock downstage as a base and placing some smaller rocks, which they find scattered about, on top of it. They place the branches that ISAAC has been carrying on the altar.

JOSHUA

Abraham didn't tell Isaac that he was planning to kill him.

AARON

Why do you suppose he didn't?

JOSHUA

Abraham probably didn't want to scare Isaac and have him run away.

AARON

Of course! Because if Isaac ran away, Abraham couldn't obey God's command.

JOSHUA

So what happened next?

AARON

Please read verse 9 aloud.

JOSHUA

"And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood." Oh man! What kind of a father would bind his son and place him on an altar so he could sacrifice him? Do you want to know what I think?

AARON

What?

JOSHUA

I think Abraham was a sadist.

AARON

Joshua! Watch what comes out of your mouth!

JOSHUA

If it wasn't sadistic of Abraham to do what he did, it was certainly immoral for him to bind his son and place him on an altar so he could sacrifice him. Don't you agree?

AARON

Yes.

JOSHUA

And I'll bet Abraham himself knew that what he was doing was immoral.

AARON

Yes, but by this point Abraham had so much faith in God that he was ready to obey God's every command, even one that might not coincide with Abraham's own standard of right and wrong.

JOSHUA

But isn't killing supposed to be against the Ten Commandments?

AARON

The Ten Commandments were not given to Moses until hundreds of years later.

JOSHUA

Oh jeez, Dad, this stuff makes me sick. Can I go get a cold drink?

AARON

Sure, but hurry back. We have a lot of work to do.

JOSHUA gets up and runs out at stage right. AARON goes to the bookcase and consults some of the books. After a while he looks at his watch and sits down in his previous seat.

AARON

Joshua!

JOSHUA comes in from stage right and sits down.

JOSHUA

Sorry, Dad!

Downstage, ABRAHAM pulls strings out of his pocket and binds ISAAC'S hands and legs. ISAAC does not resist. After binding him, ABRAHAM lays ISAAC on the altar, face up.

AARON

Now where were we? Oh, yes. Genesis, chapter 22.

JOSHUA

If I were Isaac, I would have punched and kicked Abraham and run away.

AARON

According to the story, Isaac was quite submissive. As a matter of fact, in the Jewish tradition, Isaac is praised for his submissive attitude, because it shows that indirectly he was obeying God's command, too, or at least helping Abraham obey it.

JOSHUA

So the victim is praised for submitting to his victimizer! Maybe Isaac was submissive because he was scared out of his wits. I know I would be.

ABRAHAM reaches in his pocket for his knife, then holds the knife above Isaac as if to strike him.

VOICE O.S.

Abraham! Abraham!

ABRAHAM

Here I am.

VOICE O.S.

Do not lay a hand on the lad!

ABRAHAM

What did You say?

VOICE O.S.

Do not do anything to your son!

ABRAHAM freezes, then takes a deep breath. He uses his knife to untie ISAAC and puts the knife back in his pocket. ISAAC gets up from the altar and, seemingly dazed, walks away and exits upstage. ABRAHAM spots a small ram caught in the nearby bush, catches it, then binds it and places it on the altar.

ABRAHAM

O God! Thank You for sparing my son's life! But there is something I cannot understand: After first telling me to make a burnt offering of Isaac, why did You then relent?

VOICE O.S.

Now I know that you are truly a God-fearing man. You did not withhold your son, your only son, from me.

ABRAHAM sighs, then looks all around.

ABRAHAM

Isaac! Where are you?

ABRAHAM continues looking around, then walks alone slowly in the direction from which he came, upstage. He reaches the tent, enters it and exits at stage left.

AARON

So did Abraham end up sacrificing Isaac? Read verse 12 to yourself. What does it say?

JOSHUA

(Reading to himself.)

It says that at the last moment God told Abraham not to do it.

AARON

Right. And do you know what this whole story about the sacrifice of Isaac is called?

JOSHUA

What?

AARON

It's called "The Binding of Isaac." In Hebrew it's known as "The Akedah." Can you say that?

JOSHUA

The Akedah.

AARON

Right. So why do you suppose God asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice in the first place?

JOSHUA

Beats me.

AARON

Think, Joshua! Think!

JOSHUA

I'm thinking but I still can't figure it out.

AARON

God wanted to test Abraham.

JOSHUA

What for?

AARON

He wanted to see how strong Abraham's faith in God was. If Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only remaining son, who was probably the most precious person in the whole wide world to him at this point, then God could be sure that Abraham had real faith.

JOSHUA

But Dad, it would make more sense to say that it was the other way around, that it was actually Abraham who was testing God to see how moral God really was, sort of like Abraham was playing a game of chicken with God, waiting for God to stop him. Because why would God have to test Abraham to find out how much faith Abraham had in Him? Isn't God supposed to be all-knowing, so He would certainly know if Abraham had faith in Him or not?

AARON

Good question. Actually, some scholars think that God just wanted to make an example of Abraham for others, because God knew Abraham would obey Him.

JOSHUA

What kind of an example would that be? A father sacrificing his own son?!

AARON

An example of absolute faith and of absolute obedience to God. Actually, since Abraham, whole generations have taken their inspiration from the Akedah.

JOSHUA

How so?

AARON

Think about all the wars mankind has engaged in during the past four thousand years, where fathers - and mothers - have sacrificed their kids. Many have related their experience to Abraham's.

JOSHUA

Although Abraham ended up not sacrificing Isaac, while fathers and mothers do sacrifice their kids in war, right?

AARON

That's true. Keen observation.

JOSHUA

But didn't you tell me that idol worshipping was frowned upon in the Bible because the idols demanded child sacrifice?

AARON

Yes, child sacrifice was quite prevalent in Abraham's time. Actually, according to some scholars, the fact that God in the end told Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac shows that God didn't approve of child sacrifice.

JOSHUA

But if God didn't approve of child sacrifice, how come He told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in the first place? Do you think maybe He was testing Abraham to see how moral Abraham was?

AARON

The main thing is that in the end, God told Abraham not to do it.

JOSHUA

I know that's what the Bible says, but I have a different theory about what really happened.

AARON

Why, what do you think happened?

JOSHUA

I think God truly wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to Him. That's why He told Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain and offer him there as a burnt offering. And I think actually God never changed His mind.

AARON

What do you mean?

JOSHUA

Look, Dad, if God could cause a great flood that drowned almost everyone on earth, and if He could bring towers

crashing down on people, and if He could destroy whole cities, and if He could tell a father to send one of his two sons away, then God's justice is not above requiring that a father sacrifice his only remaining son.

AARON

If that's the case, how did it happen that Abraham didn't sacrifice Isaac in the end?

JOSHUA

Maybe Abraham just refused to.

AARON

Refused? How can you say that? Don't you remember how Abraham arose early, and promptly left on a long journey to the Land of Moriah, and walked up Mount Moriah, and built an altar, and bound Isaac, and placed him on the altar, and held a knife in his hand, and raised his hand ready to strike Isaac? All this time, Abraham didn't show the slightest inkling of hesitation. So if Abraham didn't sacrifice Isaac, why didn't he, except that God intervened and stopped him?

JOSHUA

Maybe at the last moment, Abraham just changed his mind. Maybe during all the time it took him to get to Mount Moriah, he thought it over in his mind and debated with himself back and forth, and finally, when Isaac was lying there all bound on the altar, terrified, and Abraham looked into his son's eyes, which were looking back at him, Abraham decided the heck with God, I'm just not going to do it.

AARON

But Abraham was a man of faith. He had full faith in God.

JOSHUA

Wait a minute, Dad. I have an idea.

AARON

What is it, Josh?

JOSHUA

I want to get something and show you.

AARON

What is it you want to get?

JOSHUA

(Getting up.)

It'll just take a minute. I'll be right back.

AARON

Okay. But hurry up. We want to continue our discussion.

JOSHUA exits at stage right, and AARON turns to his book and reads to himself. A moment later, JOSHUA returns, holding a sharp kitchen knife in his hand.

AARON

(Gets up when he sees JOSHUA holding a knife.)

What's this all about? What do you need a knife for? Be careful not to cut yourself!

JOSHUA

I just want to show you something.

JOSHUA hands the knife to AARON.

AARON

What do I need a knife for?

JOSHUA

I just want to show you something. Here. Take the knife.

AARON

(Reluctantly taking the knife from JOSHUA.)

Now what do I do with the knife?

JOSHUA

Just hold it up, like you want to strike me with it, just as Abraham was holding it at the Akedah.

AARON

Joshua! What nonsense is this?

JOSHUA

I want you to hold the knife up like you want to strike me and at the same time look into my eyes.

AARON

Joshua!

JOSHUA

For just a moment. Please, Dad.

AARON

(Reluctantly holding up the knife as if to strike JOSHUA.)

Okay. But I wish I understood what this is all about.

JOSHUA

Just look into my eyes, Dad. What do you see?

AARON

I see my son's eyes, what else?

JOSHUA

And I see my father's eyes. And I see him ready to strike me. And I am terrified, like Isaac must have been, lying there all bound on the altar. Can you see the terror in my eyes, Dad?

AARON

I guess so. You may be a great actor, Josh, but I must admit that I do see terror in your eyes.

JOSHUA

So, looking into my eyes, could you strike me, Dad, even if you wanted to before?

AARON

Of course I couldn't.

JOSHUA

And if someone told you to do it, even God, could you do it after looking into my eyes? Could any father do it? Do you think Abraham could do it? That's why I think he refused. He looked into Isaac's eyes and just couldn't do it.

AARON

I see. Now let me get rid of this knife. I'll take it back into the kitchen.

AARON exits at stage right carrying the knife, then reenters without the knife, and resumes his seat.

JOSHUA

(Sitting down.)

Maybe it took God's demand that he sacrifice Isaac to make Abraham decide to disobey God. Maybe Abraham had full faith in God until he realized what God was really like. Do you want me to tell you what Abraham realized?

AARON

What did Abraham realize?

JOSHUA

That God is a sadist.

AARON

Joshua! Please!

JOSHUA

Okay. But you must admit that actually God ordered Abraham to do something immoral when He told him to sacrifice Isaac. Because for Abraham to kill his son would certainly be immoral.

AARON

I agree. It would have been immoral for Abraham to kill Isaac. But in the end he didn't do it, and the question is, "Why?"

JOSHUA

Look Dad. Abraham had a choice. He could either obey God and act against his own sense of right and wrong. Or Abraham could disobey God and do what his own moral sense dictated. If you were faced with this kind of dilemma, with having to choose between obedience to God on the one hand and acting morally on the other, what would you choose?

AARON

You're right about the dilemma facing Abraham. And I'd probably choose to act in accordance with my own sense of justice. But that doesn't change the fact that according to Genesis, chapter 22, Abraham chose to obey God and sacrifice Isaac.

JOSHUA

Let's assume you're right. Maybe Abraham didn't refuse to sacrifice Isaac. Maybe Abraham was really going to do it and obey God completely, without hesitation. But still, maybe there's another explanation for why Abraham ended up not doing it.

AARON

What explanation might there be other than what the Bible tells us, namely, that in the end God told Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac?

SARAH enters the tent from stage left, walks quickly through the tent, then emerges and paces frantically around the stage, looking this way and that.

SARAH

Isaac! Isaac! Where are you, my son?

SARAH cups her ear, listening for a response, looking all around her. Suddenly, she seems to spot something downstage in the distance, and begins running downstage. She is out of breath and has to sit down on the ground and rest. This occurs several times. Each time she gets up and, with great effort, continues running downstage. When she reaches her destination, she hides behind the bush downstage, and observes an imaginary scene of ABRAHAM preparing to sacrifice ISAAC, a scene which is now past and invisible to the audience.

As the VOICE O.S. is heard next, SARAH'S lips move as if she is the one speaking.

VOICE O.S.

Abraham! Abraham! *(Pause.)* Do not lay a hand on the lad! *(Pause.)* Do not do anything to your son! *(Pause.)* Now I know that you are truly a God-fearing man. You did not withhold your son, your only son, from Me.

SARAH rises and heads rapidly back, stumbling as she runs. Out of breath, she reaches the tent. Before entering the tent, she stops and looks up at the sky.

SARAH

Oh, God of Abraham! How could you allow such an abomination? I was an old, barren woman, with no hope of bearing a child. Without Your help, my son Isaac would not have been born. But then, after giving me a son, suddenly, You want to take my son away! Oh, God of Abraham! How cruel can You be? Do You not know that it is better for a woman not to have born a son than to have a son and lose him? You may be Abraham's God, but from now on You are my God no more!

SARAH runs into the tent and exits at stage left.

JOSHUA

I think Sarah woke up and when she couldn't find Isaac, she looked around and spotted Abraham and Isaac walking away toward Mount Moriah. She followed them quietly just so she could see what they were up to, and when she reached the mountaintop and saw Isaac bound on the altar and Abraham's knife raised to strike him, she pretended she was God and stopped Abraham.

AARON

So according to your theory, the reason Abraham ended up not sacrificing Isaac is not because God stopped him but because Abraham mistakenly thought God stopped him?

JOSHUA

Right. Since Sarah imitated God's voice, Abraham thought it was actually God ordering him to stop.

AARON

That's an interesting theory. Actually, some scholars have commented on the strangeness of Sarah's silence. In the whole Akedah story, the Bible doesn't mention Sarah even once. But according to your theory, Sarah wasn't silent at all. On the contrary, according to you, from the moment she discovered that Abraham was planning to sacrifice Isaac, she took the strongest measure she could to prevent Abraham from doing it. She knew how obedient Abraham was to God, so she used God's voice to stop Abraham. How clever!

JOSHUA

But I have another theory, too. Maybe Abraham decided to sacrifice Isaac because he was mad at Sarah for asking him to send Ishmael away. Maybe it was tit for tat. So maybe it wasn't God that told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Maybe it was all Abraham's idea in the first place because he just wanted to get back at Sarah for what she did to Ishmael. And then Sarah followed Abraham up the mountain and pretended she was God and stopped him.

AARON

You have some interesting theories, Josh. Looks like you're really into the story of Abraham. I'm glad to see it, considering how reluctant you were to study the Bible when we first started. Now, speaking of theories, some scholars

think that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac because he knew ahead of time that God would stop him, or, if God didn't top him and Isaac was actually sacrificed, that God would resurrect Isaac. What do you think of that theory?

JOSHUA

If Abraham knew ahead of time that God would spare Isaac, how does the Akedah demonstrate Abraham's devotion to God? It means Abraham was just going through the motions, and that's no big deal.

AARON

I agree. Now, do you have a favorite theory among the theories you yourself enunciated?

JOSHUA

I think my favorite is the one about Sarah following Abraham and Isaac and pretending like she was God.

AARON

Actually, there may be some merit to this theory. Because in the very next chapter of Genesis, chapter 23, it tells us that Sarah died. The juxtaposition of the story of Isaac's binding and Sarah's death may not be coincidental.

JOSHUA

I think Sarah died not only because she was disappointed in Abraham for being willing to kill their son but because the incident made her lose her faith in God. I think in the beginning she didn't believe in God at all, but she went along with Abraham and let him believe what he wanted to because she loved her husband. And then, when she got pregnant and had Isaac, she became a believer. But now, when she realized that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac to God, she lost all faith, because she knew Abraham wouldn't be willing to

sacrifice Isaac without God's approval. It was a big shock to her to realize that a God she believed in betrayed her.

AARON

And Abraham? Do you think that after the binding of Isaac and after Sarah's death, he stopped believing in God, too?

JOSHUA

I wouldn't blame him if he did. God really mistreated him.

AARON

Joshua!

JOSHUA

Okay. God tested him. First Abraham was told to give up Ishmael. Then he was told to give up Isaac.

AARON

You're right. God tested Abraham time and time again. But Abraham stood the tests. That's why Abraham has been revered for thousands of years.

JOSHUA

But what about the way Abraham treated his own kids? Did Isaac ever forgive Abraham for being willing to kill him?

AARON

If you read carefully the account of Abraham's descent from Mount Moriah after the Akedah, the story doesn't say that Abraham and Isaac went back together, the way it told us previously that they walked together when they were climbing Mount Moriah. The implication is that Abraham went back without Isaac. Maybe Isaac just ran away for a while.

JOSHUA

I would have run away, too, but never come back. Isaac should have run away for good.

AARON

It probably took quite a while before Isaac felt close to his father again.

JOSHUA

Poor Isaac. What he must have felt, lying there bound on the altar and seeing his father wielding a knife, ready to kill him!

AARON

It must have been very frightening, I agree.

JOSHUA

It would have been bad enough if it was a stranger Isaac saw threatening to kill him. But it was his own father!

AARON

You're right, Josh. That experience must have been quite traumatic for Isaac. Isaac didn't have it easy. The Bible tells us that in later life he became blind.

JOSHUA

Maybe it was a delayed reaction to seeing his own father threatening to kill him, seeing it with his own eyes! But what I really want to know is whether God was ever sorry for making Abraham mistreat his kids. Remember when we were talking about the Great Flood, and God recognized that He made a mistake and promised never to bring about another great flood again? Well, did God ever feel sorry for what He made Abraham do to Ishmael and Isaac? Actually, God was responsible for Abraham's child abuse.

AARON

Joshua!

JOSHUA

I'll bet if Abraham was living today and if he did what he did to his kids, kicking one kid out and threatening to kill the other kid, that Social Services would be there in a second.

AARON

Probably.

JOSHUA

Well, does the Bible tell us God was sorry?

AARON

No, the Bible doesn't tell us that God regretted what he told Abraham to do.

JOSHUA

Maybe God doesn't admit His mistakes after all.

AARON

Except that, come to think of it, the prohibition of murder in the Ten Commandments may have been God's way of admitting he made a mistake at the Akedah.

JOSHUA

Does that mean God learned from His mistake?

AARON

Probably.

JOSHUA

Because didn't you tell me that it's important to first admit one's mistakes and then learn from them?

AARON

You're right, Josh. You have to at least admit your mistakes to yourself.

JOSHUA

(Pause.)

Dad, I want to know something. What if God told you to kill me, like God told Abraham to kill Isaac. Would you do it?

AARON

I already told you, God has never spoken to me.

JOSHUA

But what if He did?

AARON

I wouldn't do it.

JOSHUA

Don't you think if you took steps to kill me you'd be arrested?

AARON

Probably.

JOSHUA

And then, when you were brought to trial, don't you think if your defense was that you heard the voice of God telling you to kill your son, that your lawyer would argue that you were just out of your mind, that you were insane?

AARON

Probably.

JOSHUA

Because normal people don't hear voices.

AARON

You're probably right.

JOSHUA

So maybe Abraham was simply insane?

AARON

Joshua! Watch your words!

JOSHUA

But, Dad, what was so great about Abraham, if he heard voices that made him abuse his own kids? Why is he so highly regarded?

AARON

I told you. He did what he did in obedience to God.

JOSHUA

Or so he thought. Maybe those voices were just in his head.

AARON

Abraham was a man of absolute faith. That's what he is admired for, not only in the Jewish tradition but also by Christianity and Islam.

JOSHUA

I'm glad I'm not Abraham's son. There's no telling what God might ask him to do to me if I was his son.

AARON

(Pats JOSHUA lovingly on the head.)

I, too, am glad you're not Abraham's son, Josh, but rather my son. Now, let's continue. Do you know what Abraham did after Sarah died?

JOSHUA

What?

AARON

He bought a burial place for her in Hebron, and it can still be visited. It's considered a holy site.

JOSHUA

And what happened to Abraham after that? Did he die, too? He certainly deserved to.

AARON

Joshua! No, actually he married again.

JOSHUA

No kidding!

AARON

He married a woman called "Keturah."

JOSHUA

Maybe "Keturah" was really Hagar? I think Abraham always fancied Hagar.

AARON

It's possible.

JOSHUA

Did Abraham and Keturah have any kids?

AARON

Yes, several.

JOSHUA

I hope Abraham didn't abuse them the way he abused Ishmael and Isaac.

AARON

The Bible doesn't tell us much about Keturah's children.

JOSHUA

But how about Isaac and Ishmael? Did they ever get together? After all, they were brothers. I wish I had a brother.

AARON

I know you do. Yes, they got together. Please read Genesis 25, verses 8-9, to me.

JOSHUA searches in his book, leafing back and forth. AARON helps him find the right page and points to the spot.

JOSHUA

"And Abraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years, and was gathered to his people. And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him..."

AARON

Stop and read the rest of the verse and the following one to yourself and tell me where Abraham was buried.

JOSHUA

(Reading to himself.)

Near Sarah, in Hebron.

AARON

Excellent!

JOSHUA

I hope Abraham and Sarah got along better after they died than they did before. You know what I really think? I think those two deserved each other.

AARON

Joshua! Please!

ISAAC and ISHMAEL enter the tent from stage left and walk slowly and solemnly through the tent, carrying together a long, heavy sack on their right shoulders, with ISAAC leading and ISHMAEL following a few feet behind. They have a somber expression on their faces. They emerge from the tent, then turn upstage.

ISAAC

(Trying to look over his free shoulder at ISHMAEL.)

It is good to see you again, Ishmael!

ISHMAEL

It is good to see you, too, Isaac!

ISAAC

I missed you all these years.

ISHMAEL

And I missed you.

ISAAC

Maybe now that they are both gone, we can get together.

ISHMAEL

Nothing would please me more.

ISAAC

We have a lot of catching up to do.

ISHMAEL

We certainly do.

ISAAC

(Pause.)

It will be difficult to make up for all those lost years.

ISHMAEL

True. We lost too much for that.

ISAAC

(Pause.)

Our father was a complex man.

ISHMAEL

He was a man of faith.

ISAAC

A man of faith, for good or ill. And the two of us paid the price.

ISHMAEL

Amen!

ISAAC and ISHMAEL keep walking slowly and solemnly upstage, carrying the sack, then exit.

JOSHUA

So Dad, do you remember that when we first started studying the Bible together, you said that we don't study Bible stories for entertainment? You said these stories teach us something, that they teach us how we should behave. So what does the

story of Abraham teach us about how we should behave? I can't figure it out.

AARON

(Pause.)

That's a good question, Josh. I'll have to think about it. I thought I knew the answer, but after studying the story of Abraham with you, I'm not sure any more. Let's both think about it, and we can discuss it next time. How's that?

CURTAIN

MICHAL

A short play in three acts

CHARACTERS

MICHAL	A princess.
SAUL	MICHAL'S father, a king.
DAVID	MICHAL'S husband, future/present king.
PALTI	MICHAL'S second husband.
JONATHAN	MICHAL'S brother.
SAMUEL	A prophet.
WITCH	The Witch of Endor.

TIME AND PLACE

The action takes place in ancient Israel, in the time of King Saul, the first king of Israel, who reigned about 3000 years ago. The play was inspired by the story told in two books of the Old Testament, Samuel I and Samuel II.

ACT ONE

The stage is dimly lit, suggesting nighttime. The ground is bare except for a large rock at upstage center. SAUL, dressed in a long, dark cloak and having much of his face obscured by a hood, enters from stage left. He hesitates, looks in all directions, then walks quickly across the stage toward stage right, where a transparent curtain-wall hangs diagonally. The curtain-wall has a slit in it, which serves as a doorway. The triangular area behind the curtain-wall, a cave-like space, is illuminated with a flickering light, suggesting fire. An old woman, the WITCH, can be seen through the curtain-wall. She is dressed in rags and is seated on a stool in the interior of the cave. She is using a long stick to stir something and is chanting.

Throughout this ACT, whenever MICHAL speaks, she is addressing the audience.

SAUL

(Whispering audibly through the curtain-wall.)

Let me in!

WITCH

(Startled, stops chanting, gets up, approaches the curtain-wall and looks out through it.)

Who's - - there?

SAUL

Let me in! Hurry up!

WITCH

Who are you - - that you dare - - disturb a woman - - this time of night?

SAUL

Let me in, I tell you!

WITCH

(Holding up her stick in a menacing posture.)

Who - - are you - - to speak to me - - this way?

SAUL

Don't ask questions. Just open the door!

WITCH

I won't - - let a stranger in.

SAUL

Let me in, I command you! Let me in or I'll break in!

WITCH

(Retreating.)

Who are you - - to threaten me? - - Don't you know - - I'm an old woman?

SAUL

Let me in, old woman!

MICHAL enters from stage left. She walks toward upstage where, hiding behind the rock, she observes SAUL and the WITCH.

MICHAL

My poor father! Up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep! But what is he doing here?

SAUL

(Pulls a shiny coin out of his cloak pocket and holds it up for the WITCH to see.)

Are you not for hire?

MICHAL

A euphemism! Poor man! Seeking the comforts of a woman while my dear mother's on her sickbed. And he has a concubine, too! What will his stricken mind think of next?

WITCH

(Notices the coin and smiles.)

Well - -

SAUL

Speak up, woman! Are you not a witch?

MICHAL

This is getting worse by the minute. Poor Father! Why would he suddenly seek the services of a witch? He must be at his wits' end!

WITCH

I was.

SAUL

And now?

WITCH

Witchcraft - - is dead.

SAUL

Dead? No, I will not have it!

WITCH

Haven't you heard - - about King Saul's edict?

SAUL

What of it?

WITCH

By the prophet's command - - King Saul - - killed all the witches - - in the land.

SAUL

All but one. The Witch of Endor.

WITCH

True - - I alone remain - - by the will of God.

SAUL

By the king's mercy!

WITCH

Out of fear - - I gave up - - my craft.

SAUL

But why, if the king spared you?

WITCH

How could I - - be sure - - whether I lived by accident - - or by design?

SAUL

(Removing his hood.)

It was not by accident, I assure you! This king is in command. He knows what he's doing.

MICHAL

My God! Now he reveals himself! What will God think? And the people? He is their king! And now he suddenly resorts to witchcraft!

WITCH

(Dropping her stick and staring at SAUL.)

King Saul?!

SAUL

The very one.

WITCH

Why did you not - - announce yourself?

SAUL

I knew you would succumb.

WITCH

You - - frightened me.

SAUL

Let me in. It's getting late.

WITCH

Please don't - - hurt me.

SAUL

I spared your life before, didn't I?

WITCH

(Hesitantly opening the curtain-wall door and letting SAUL in.)

Welcome - - my King!

SAUL

(Stepping in and handing the WITCH his coin.)

Here. Take it. Hurry up!

MICHAL rises from her hiding place behind the rock. She walks quietly toward the WITCH'S curtain-wall, where she stops, looks inside and listens.

WITCH

(Slipping the coin into her pocket.)

Thank you, your Majesty, - - your generosity - - is legendary - - Please sit down.

The WITCH picks up the stool and brings it to SAUL.

SAUL

(Seating himself on the stool.)

Get to work now. I need you to conjure up someone.

WITCH

Who is it - - you wish to - - conjure up - - your Majesty?

SAUL

The old prophet, Samuel.

WITCH

No! Not Samuel! - - I fear him.

SAUL

(Taking another coin out of his pocket.)

He won't harm you, I promise.

WITCH

(Taking the coin and slipping it into her pocket.)

But it was he who ordered - - all the witches killed!

SAUL

He's dead now. He can no longer order anything.

WITCH

So why - - conjure him up - - your Majesty?

SAUL

Though dead, perhaps he can still see the future. God may still speak to him, as He did before.

MICHAL

I wonder if God ever did. I suspect Samuel simply made things up to keep control.

WITCH

Why wouldn't you - - speak directly - - to God - - your Majesty?

SAUL

I can't.

WITCH

Why not? - - It's well known - - throughout the land - - that it was God - - who chose you to be king!

SAUL

God will no longer speak to me. He's angry at me for my sins.

MICHAL

That's what Samuel told him, poor man. The prophet was jealous of my father from the start.

WITCH

But God chose you - - to be our first king - - your Majesty!

SAUL

True. And for a while God's spirit was upon me. But then…

MICHAL

And then, as my father won his battles against our enemies and became more popular, the prophet's jealousy mounted.

WITCH

What happened - - then?

SAUL

Suddenly, God's spirit left me. I never heard from God again. I had to go through Samuel to know what God desired of me.

MICHAL

Or so the prophet convinced my poor father. I've always had my doubts about that old geezer, Samuel.

WITCH

Maybe God - - will hear you now - - your Majesty.

SAUL

(Suddenly getting angry.)

Enough of this! Now conjure Samuel up!

WITCH

I'm - - out of practice.

SAUL

Do it, I say. The enemy will be attacking in the morning, and I need to know what God wants me to do.

WITCH

Ask God - - directly!

SAUL

(Rising and menacing.)

Listen, you witch! I'm not here to argue with the likes of you. Conjure up the prophet or else!

The WITCH hesitates, then begins making motions with her arms and chanting. Strange, thunderous sounds are heard. An old man, SAMUEL, enters the cave slowly from the interior of the cave at upstage right. He is dressed in a long robe and has a somber expression on his face. Upon seeing him, the WITCH covers her face with her hands.

WITCH

It is - - he!

SAUL

What is he like?

WITCH

A - - Godlike - - figure.

SAUL

What does he look like?

WITCH

(Uncovers her face.)

An old man - - wearing a robe.

SAUL

(Falls to the ground and bows his head.)

Samuel, prophet of God! You have come!

WITCH

(Retreating from SAMUEL.)

Please don't strike me down - - the king made me do it.

SAMUEL

(To SAUL.)

Why have you disturbed me?

SAUL

(Rising.)

The enemy is about to attack and God has departed from me.

SAMUEL

You sinned against Him.

SAUL

I'm sorry if I did. I did my best.

SAMUEL

You sacrificed to Him when you were told to wait.

SAUL

A battle was brewing. I sacrificed to ensure the people's victory.

SAMUEL

You spared the lives of enemies when you were told to smite them.

SAUL

I listened to the people's voice.

SAMUEL

In sparing the enemy you contravened God's justice.

SAUL

I followed my conscience, man's guide to right and wrong.

SAMUEL

I had to strike the enemy king myself to satisfy God.

MICHAL

What a bloodthirsty view of God this prophet has! I'm proud of Father for his compassion.

SAUL

I remember that gory scene quite well. You dismembered that king!

SAMUEL

It's not for man to decide what is and is not just.

SAUL

Then why did God plant in us a sense of justice?

SAMUEL

To be ignored when God has spoken. Man must obey the higher law.

SAUL

I'm sorry if I sinned. I love God with all my heart.

SAMUEL

The only way to show God your love is through strict obedience.

SAUL

Henceforth I will follow His justice even if it contradicts my conscience.

SAMUEL

Too late. You've had your chance. Now God has torn the kingdom away from you and given it to another.

SAMUEL bends down, reaches for a corner of SAUL'S cloak and rips it off. He throws the torn piece into the interior of the cave as if it were a piece of trash.

WITCH

My God!

MICHAL

Samuel's audacity knows no bounds!

SAMUEL

What God expects is for man to obey His word. You, Saul, have failed.

SAUL

But how can I obey His word if He won't speak to me? Neither by prophets nor by dreams. That's why I called you. So you can tell me what I should do.

SAMUEL

It's too late, I tell you. There's nothing for you to do but accept God's will.

SAUL

And what is God's will now?

SAMUEL

That the enemy will prevail.

SAUL

No!

SAMUEL

And you and your sons shall die in battle tomorrow.

The WITCH covers her face and retreats. SAUL falls to the ground and sobs. SAMUEL turns around and slowly exits at stage right. MICHAL enters the cave through the slit in the curtain-wall and kneels next to SAUL, then helps him up and leads him out of the cave and across the stage toward stage left.

SAUL

(Leaning on MICHAL and sobbing.)

Did you hear what Samuel said? My kingdom will be ripped from me. The enemy will prevail. And my sons will be killed. Is that God's justice? To kill the innocent because of my own sins?

MICHAL

Poor Father. I don't believe a word that Samuel says. Samuel is a bitter old man, jealous of the king because the people chose Saul to be king rather than Samuel. There is no way Samuel's prediction reflects God's will!

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

The next morning. A large room in King SAUL'S palace. The large rock from ACT ONE is still upstage, and serves as a seat. The upstage area is in darkness; only the downstage area is illuminated. JONATHAN, downstage, is dressed in battle gear, with a bow and arrows tucked into his belt. He is pacing back and forth. MICHAL enters from downstage right.

JONATHAN

(Surprised, greeting MICHAL with a warm hug.)

Michal! I thought it was Father. Why are you up so early?

MICHAL

Oh, Jonathan, I couldn't sleep at all.

JONATHAN

You need your rest, sis. You fret about Father all day. You have to take care of yourself.

MICHAL

You'll never believe what he did last night!

JONATHAN

I hope he got a good night's sleep before today's battle!

MICHAL

He was up and out.

JONATHAN

Out?

MICHAL

He went to Endor.

JONATHAN

Endor? What for? How do you know?

MICHAL

I followed him there.

JONATHAN

And?

MICHAL

I wanted to see what he was up to. I'm still trying to figure out what's happened to his mind. He's so different from the way he was.

JONATHAN

Yes, he used to be so calm, as if without a care, although, of course, as God's anointed king, the responsibility for our people's welfare rested on his shoulders.

MICHAL

His shoulders were broad enough to carry the heavy burden even though he never sought the crown.

The downstage area, where MICHAL and JONATHAN are standing, is darkened, and the upstage area is illuminated. SAMUEL enters from upstage. A young SAUL, dressed in farm clothes, follows him a moment later, looking this way and that, then focusing his eyes on SAMUEL.

SAUL

Excuse me, sir. Do you know where I might find the prophet Samuel?

SAMUEL

(Stopping and turning around to face SAUL.)

I am the prophet Samuel. Did you not recognize me, boy?

SAUL

Sorry, sir. I don't live around here. I'm just a farm boy looking for his father's donkeys.

SAMUEL

What is your name, boy?

SAUL

It's "Saul," sir.

SAMUEL

Did you say you are looking for some donkeys?

SAUL

Yes, I'm looking for my father's donkeys. I've been doing it for days. By now my father must be more concerned about me than about his donkeys.

SAMUEL

I wouldn't be surprised.

SAUL

I'd like to find them, though, to make my father proud of me. Since you're a prophet, can you tell me where my father's donkeys are?

SAMUEL

Of course I can. God speaks to me directly. He gives me the power to see. And I can clearly see that your father's donkeys have been found and returned to him.

There is a loud clamor coming from offstage, with shouts of "We want a king!" heard repeatedly and with increasing volume.

SAUL

What's all that noise?

SAMUEL

(Looking up at the sky.)

O God, they want a king! The people have rejected my house! After all my sons and I have done for them!

SAMUEL sobs.

SAUL

Why do the people want a king? Why have they rejected you?

SAMUEL

The people think I am too old and my sons too corrupt to serve as judges over them. The people want a king so they can be like all the other nations.

SAUL

But we've never had a king. How can the people know it's wise to have one?

SAMUEL

That is exactly what I would like to know. Why do the people need a king? I will simply refuse to anoint one.

SAUL

Would such refusal be acceptable to God?

SAMUEL

Since the power of anointing rests with me, I can just forbear from exercising it.

SAUL

What will God say about that?

SAMUEL

(Looking up at the sky.)

Hush, boy! God is speaking to me. What is that, O God? What are You saying? It is You that they reject, not me, when they demand a king? I should anoint a king forthwith? And You have chosen someone to be king?

SAUL

Did God already choose a king? So fast?

SAMUEL

Yes, my boy, and it is you He chose.

SAUL

(Taking a step back in awe.)

Me? Are you sure? There must be some mistake. Please ask God again! I'm not fit to be a king. I'm nothing but a farm boy from an unimportant family. All I've ever wished for is to walk in my father's and my grandfather's footsteps and be a farmer.

The light upstage goes off and SAUL and SAMUEL exit in darkness. The downstage area is illuminated, revealing MICHAL and JONATHAN as before.

JONATHAN

First Samuel anointed Father. And later Father was also chosen king by lot.

MICHAL

Chosen by God Himself.

JONATHAN

And Father was so shy and modest. He hid on Grandfather's farm even though he was God's anointed.

MICHAL

But he rose to the occasion when our enemies attacked. He proved himself a leader, courageous and self confident. But last night…

MICHAL breaks down and cries. JONATHAN hugs her, then helps wipe away her tears.

JONATHAN

What happened last night?

MICHAL

As I said, Father went to Endor.

JONATHAN

But why?

MICHAL

To see a witch.

JONATHAN

I thought Father had all the witches killed on Samuel's command.

MICHAL

It seems that Father spared this witch's life.

JONATHAN

Why would he do that if God wanted all the witches dead?

MICHAL

Perhaps Father didn't believe that Samuel was speaking God's word. Maybe Father was again showing his compassion.

JONATHAN

Or maybe Father just wanted to leave himself an out, in case he needed to consult someone.

MICHAL

That's possible. It's really difficult to follow Father's thinking these days. At any rate, he had the Witch of Endor work her witchcraft to conjure up someone.

JONATHAN

Whom?

MICHAL

Guess!

JONATHAN

Tell me!

MICHAL

Samuel!

JONATHAN

The prophet Samuel?

MICHAL

Yes.

JONATHAN

Hard to believe that Father would want to see Samuel again. After all the pain the prophet caused him.

MICHAL

That's how I felt, knowing what Samuel told Father time and time again: that God had abandoned him because of Father's so-called sins.

JONATHAN

Sins born of Father's concern for our people. His love for others. His compassion.

MICHAL

I really think it was Samuel's accusations that started Father on his downward spiral. Father felt deserted by God and lost his self-assurance.

JONATHAN

So what did Samuel say this time?

MICHAL

The usual stuff. That because Father sinned, his kingdom would be torn away and given to another. As you know, I don't place much credence in what Samuel says. I think he makes things up.

JONATHAN

I agree. But unfortunately, it was Samuel's threat that the kingdom would be torn away from Father that made Father begin suspecting David of planning to replace him on the throne.

MICHAL

And David was so innocent! He had no such intent.

JONATHAN

David's always been loyal to our family. He worshipped Father! Frankly, between you and me, I would be happy if David followed Father to the throne. I myself have no interest in being king.

MICHAL

I know. And before Samuel launched his threats, Father trusted David.

JONATHAN

Father showed his trust by giving you to David as his bride. And my dear friend David became my brother. You know, Michal, I liked David from the start. I still remember when he first came to the palace.

MICHAL

Luckily, someone recommended him as a musician who could lift Father's spirits.

MICHAL and JONATHAN maintain their positions as the downstage area is darkened and the upstage area is illuminated to reveal SAUL sitting dejected on the rock upstage, with his crown on and holding a spear. DAVID is sitting at SAUL'S feet, holding a harp.

DAVID

What shall I sing for you today, King Saul?

SAUL

I trust you to come up with something good, David. You always do.

DAVID

I made up a new song. I thought it might ease your mind.

SAUL

Sing it, David. Let me hear it.

DAVID

(Singing while playing his harp.)

O God, rebuke me not in Your anger,
neither chasten me in Your wrath.
Be gracious unto me, O God, for I languish away;
heal me, O God, for my bones are affrighted.
My soul also is sore affrighted;
and You, O God, how long?

SAUL

Truer words were never spoken. You certainly understand how I feel, David. Please go on.

DAVID

(Continues singing and playing.)

Return, O God, deliver my soul;
save me for Your mercy's sake.
For in death there is no remembrance of You;
in the nether-world who will give You thanks?
I am weary with my groaning;
every night make I my bed to swim;
I melt away my couch with my tears.
Mine eye is dimmed because of vexation;
it waxes old because of all mine adversaries.

SAUL

Beautiful, David! You're a true poet!

DAVID

(Continues singing and playing.)

Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity;
for God has heard the voice of my weeping.

God has heard my supplication;
God receives my prayer.
All mine enemies shall be ashamed and sore affrighted;
they shall turn back, they shall be ashamed suddenly.

SAUL

(Sits up on his throne, a smile on his face.)

Thank you, David. I feel so much better. You're just like a son to me, and I love you!

DAVID

Thank you, my King!

SAUL and DAVID maintain their positions while the upstage area is darkened and the downstage area is illuminated.

JONATHAN

What a blessing David was to Father! All David had to do was sing and play, and Father's mood was magically transformed.

MICHAL

Yes, David had a wondrous touch. Not just with music but with people. He really cared and put himself out for others.

JONATHAN

That's why he volunteered to fight Goliath, that giant of a man whom everyone else feared.

MICHAL and JONATHAN maintain their positions as the downstage area is darkened and the upstage area is illuminated to reveal a crowned SAUL sitting as before, holding a spear, with DAVID sitting at his feet and holding his harp.

DAVID

My King, I hear the enemy will have a giant fighting us.

SAUL

A mighty giant whose very sight makes men lose heart.

DAVID

And this giant's name is what, my King?

SAUL

Goliath. .

DAVID

Is it true, my King, the giant wishes to fight just one of ours, and have the match decide the outcome of the war?

SAUL

That's his idea. But there's not one among our people who would face Goliath.

DAVID

If you'd permit me to suggest someone, my King, I know someone who could beat the giant.

SAUL

You do? Who?

DAVID

Well, uh…

SAUL

Speak up, David! Who among us would be so courageous as to face Goliath?

DAVID

Uh. Sir! My King! I think - - I would.

SAUL

You? The court musician?

DAVID

I, the shepherd boy. As a shepherd, I killed bear and lion both.

SAUL

You did?

DAVID

Yes, I was protecting my father's herd of sheep, my King.

SAUL

What weapons did you use to slay the beasts?

DAVID

Nothing but my sling and some small, smooth stones, my King.

SAUL

And is that how you would arm yourself against Goliath, with a sling and some small, smooth stones?

DAVID

Of course, my King.

SAUL

Hah! Are you aware how this Goliath's armed? He has a brass helmet on his head and a heavy coat of armor.

DAVID

I see, my King.

SAUL

He has greaves of brass on his legs and a brass javelin between his shoulders.

DAVID

Interesting.

SAUL

The shaft of his spear is like a beam.

DAVID

Aha.

SAUL

And his spear's head is sharp and weighty.

DAVID

Hmm.

SAUL

Do you still want to fight the giant, David?

DAVID

With God's help, I can beat him with a sling, my King.

SAUL

You seem so self-assured and quite determined. And since nobody else would fight the giant, I'd let you do it on only one condition.

DAVID

What's that, my King?

SAUL

That you will wear my armor when you fight. I couldn't let you go out there without.

DAVID

How could I fight Goliath with your armor on, my King? It would hamper my movement and ability to fight.

SAUL

Just try my armor on, David, then decide, won't you? I couldn't bear to have my David killed.

SAUL and DAVID maintain their positions while the upstage area is darkened and the downstage area is illuminated. MICHAL and JONATHAN are downstage, as before.

JONATHAN

Even after Father agreed to let David fight, he wasn't confident that David could prevail.

MICHAL

Or indeed survive. That's why Father wanted David to wear the king's armor.

JONATHAN

But David would have none of it. He faced Goliath wearing nothing but his shepherd clothing and carrying his sling.

MICHAL

What a courageous young man was David! And yet so unassuming. I loved him all the more for that!

JONATHAN

After he killed Goliath with his sling, David cut off the giant's head with Goliath's own sword.

MICHAL

But he didn't keep the giant's head as a trophy for himself, although he was entitled to.

JONATHAN

Right. After the match, he walked into the palace carrying Goliath's head, to give it to Father as a token of his loyalty.

MICHAL

It was quite a spectacle.

JONATHAN

And do you remember how all our people cheered David?

MICHAL

How could I forget? They sang, ***"Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."***

JONATHAN

David instantly became a national hero.

MICHAL

Unfortunately, it didn't do much for Father's soul. His self esteem suffered even further. What Samuel started, David's victory over Goliath continued. Father began suspecting that David was the one who would replace him on the throne.

MICHAL and JONATHAN maintain their positions as the downstage area is darkened. The upstage area is illuminated to reveal a crowned SAUL sitting dejected on the rock, a spear in his hand, with DAVID sitting at the wall nearby, holding his harp.

SAUL

Sing, David! Have you forgotten what you're here for?

DAVID

I have just the right song for you, my King. I wrote it very recently, after my contest with Goliath.

SAUL

Don't mention Goliath to me. Just sing.

DAVID

Yes, my King!

SAUL

Let me hear it already!

DAVID

(Singing and playing his harp.)

O God, our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth!
whose majesty is rehearsed above the heavens.
Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings
have You founded strength,
because of Your adversaries;
that You might still the enemy and the avenger.
When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which You have established;
What is man, that You are mindful of him?
and the son of man, that You think of him?
Yet You have made him but little lower than the angels,
and have crowned him with glory and honor.
You have made him to have dominion
over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet:
Sheep and oxen, all of them…

SAUL sits up, holds up his spear, aims it at DAVID and throws it. DAVID, unaware, is engrossed in singing and playing as SAUL'S spear strikes the wall beside him and falls

to the ground. DAVID stops abruptly, looks around, notices the spear lying on the ground next to him, then looks at SAUL and gets up and flees, exiting at stage left. SAUL gets up and runs toward the wall to retrieve his spear, then chases DAVID, but DAVID has escaped. SAUL drops the spear, falls to the ground and sobs. After a while, the lighting over the upstage area goes off, while the downstage area becomes illuminated.

JONATHAN

How sad to think that Father tried to kill David!

MICHAL

Yes, and that was just the beginning. He demanded that David single-handedly smite a hundred of the enemy before David and I could wed.

JONATHAN

I think Father was hoping David would be killed trying to smite a hundred men.

MICHAL

But David succeeded in killing the hundred, so I became his bride. Luckily Merav wanted to marry Adriel, or she would have been entitled to marry David, as Father's older daughter.

JONATHAN

You seemed so happy to be David's wife!

MICHAL

Yes, we were very much in love! And David was as kind and giving in our marriage as he was in everything else.

JONATHAN

How sad for you that David had to leave!

MICHAL

David's life was at stake.

JONATHAN

I wonder if your marriage only increased Father's jealousy of David. You were always Father's favorite.

MICHAL

I've often wondered that myself.

JONATHAN

David had no choice but to escape.

MICHAL

I helped him do it, if you recall. His life meant more to me than my own happiness.

JONATHAN

How sad that it was Father who caused you to give up your husband!

MICHAL

Sometimes I wonder if Father's jealousy of David would have melted away if David and I had child.

JONATHAN

Such a child would have merged the House of Saul with the House of David. A perfect solution to Father's discontent.

MICHAL

But we never had a chance. David had to flee from Father almost at the start.

JONATHAN

How ironic that it was Father himself who made impossible such an obvious solution.

MICHAL

And it was not long before Father gave me to Palti.

JONATHAN

Perhaps it was Father's way of punishing David. Taking his beloved wife away and giving her to another man.

MICHAL

I felt like I was being punished, too. My love for David knew no bounds. It took a long time before I made my peace with Father's action. Luckily Palti was a kind and gentle soul. And over time I forgave Father. I guess I had to mature before I understood that Father was not evil, only sick. I overcame my anger.

JONATHAN

You've spent a lot of time in the palace lately, trying to help Father.

MICHAL

Palti has been most understanding, the dear man.

JONATHAN

You have a kind and forgiving heart, Michal. If David knew, he would be very proud!

SAUL, in battle gear, with a long sword tucked in his belt, enters from upstage. He looks disheveled and haggard. He approaches MICHAL and JONATHAN downstage.

SAUL

Come on, Jonathan. We'll pick up your brothers at the camp. It's time to face our enemy. Let's go.

JONATHAN and SAUL hug MICHAL in turn, then exit upstage.

MICHAL

(Calling after them.)

May God keep you both! Farewell!

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

A few years later. The area at stage right is dark. At stage left, a small room in DAVID'S palace is illuminated, as is the area in front of it downstage. The room, which is defined by vertical bars suggesting a prison cell, is sparsely furnished with a mattress placed on the floor against the bars near center stage, and a stool. There is a door in the back of the room, while at downstage, facing the audience, is a small, high, opening in the bars, which serves as a window. An aged MICHAL is sitting on the stool, looking dejected. The sound of trumpets and cheering can be heard coming from offstage. MICHAL gets up, walks over to the window and peers out. An aged DAVID enters from stage left and appears downstage, in front of the window. He has his crown on but is naked from his waist up. He is dancing wildly to the music.

MICHAL

It's David dancing half-naked in the street!

MICHAL shakes her head from side to side, then turns away from the window and sits on her stool again. The sound of trumpets and cheering from offstage increases and MICHAL gets up, walks to the window and looks out again. DAVID is still dancing wildly.

MICHAL

The king has lost all sense of dignity!

MICHAL turns away from the window and sits on her stool again. The sound of trumpets and cheering from offstage increases, and MICHAL gets up, approaches the window and looks out yet again. DAVID is still dancing wildly.

MICHAL

I can't imagine Father behaving in this brazen way! With all his problems, Father would never willingly sacrifice the dignity of his office by dancing half-naked in the street. I wonder what it is that makes people who attain great power change. Does their power go into their head and make them feel super-human, so they think they can do anything they please? Or do they operate out of fear of losing their power, so they do whatever they hope will bolster them in their position? I know Father changed after he became king, but then I've always believed it was Samuel who caused the change. What is it that caused David to change?

The sound of trumpets and cheering stops. The lights at stage left go off. The stage is dark for a moment before the lights at stage right go up. A middle-aged DAVID, dressed in military garb and wearing a crown, enters from upstage right, followed by a middle-aged MICHAL, whose waist is tied by a rope pulled by DAVID. PALTI enters a moment later, following the procession a couple of feet behind MICHAL. PALTI is crying.

MICHAL

What has become of you, David, that you treat me like an animal?

DAVID

I asked you to follow me willingly, but you refused.

MICHAL

I am King Saul's daughter! I take orders from no one!

DAVID

That's why I had no choice but to treat you as my prisoner.

MICHAL

Have you no regard for the fact that I was once your wife?

DAVID

You still are my wife, though many years have passed since we last saw each other.

MICHAL

Father gave me as a wife to Palti when you left.

DAVID

I never divorced you. You're still my wife.

MICHAL

By our people's custom, when a man abandons his wife, she is free to marry another.

DAVID

You know full well I never abandoned you. I had to flee from your father. He was intent on killing me.

MICHAL

And while you were fleeing from my father and after, you acquired several wives, I hear. Was it five wives? Or was it six? Or seven? Let me count: There was Ahinoam, the Jezreelite; Abigail the Carmelite; Maachah, daughter of Talmai, King of Geshur; there was Haggith; and Abital; and Eglah; and last but not least, Bathsheba, previously wife of Uriah the Hittite, the famous Uriah whom you sent to battle to be killed so you could marry his widow. Now, have I listed all your wives? Sounds like a full harem to me.

DAVID

I see you followed my comings and goings quite closely. Actually, in courting other women, I was trying to forget you,

Michal. But now I see you have become a bitter woman. I don't remember you being this way when we were young.

MICHAL

Life has a way of taking its toll. I lost my father and three brothers in the war. Such loss would take a heavy toll on anyone.

DAVID

(Stops walking and faces MICHAL.)

It took a toll on me too, Michal. Your brother Jonathan was my dearest friend. And I greatly admired your father. Although your father persecuted me without pause and would have killed me if he could, I never harmed him even when the opportunity arose.

The stage goes dark. Slowly the area in front of the barred room is illuminated. SAUL wearing a crown, is seen lying there on the ground, sleeping, with his sword upright, its tip stuck in the ground beside him. A young DAVID approaches SAUL stealthily, grabs SAUL'S sword and, carrying the sword, runs back to the darkened area at stage right.

DAVID

King Saul! Wake up! Get up and wield your sword!

SAUL

(Wakes up and looks around.)

My sword! Who took my sword? It's gone!

DAVID

Don't worry, King Saul. I have your sword. Do you want it back?

SAUL

I recognize the voice. Is it you, David?

DAVID

Yes, it's David, your son-in-law, your son Jonathan's best friend and your eternal servant. I'm standing here, not far from you. And I do, indeed, have your sword. I got close enough to you to grab it, and to kill you if I wished. But, as you can see, I didn't kill you, because I have no intention to harm you, let alone kill you or take away your throne. You are God's anointed and I honor God's will. If only you knew what's in my heart you'd stop this mad pursuit of me and let me come back.

DAVID tosses the sword toward SAUL. It lands on the ground near SAUL, who picks it up. The area in front of the barred room goes dark. Saul exits. Slowly, stage right is illuminated and DAVID, wearing a crown, resumes leading MICHAL by the rope tied to her waist, with PALTI following.

MICHAL

I know you meant Father no harm, David. It was Samuel who poisoned Father's mind by threatening him with losing his throne.

DAVID

Did Samuel indicate to whom King Saul would lose it?

MICHAL

No, but once you killed Goliath and became a national hero, Father just assumed you were the one of whom Samuel spoke.

DAVID

Sometimes I wish I never fought Goliath. It began a downward spiral for me.

MICHAL

But you saved our people by slaying the giant!

DAVID

At what cost to our personal lives, Michal! To make it worse, the victory was short-lived, as many war victories are. It was not long before the same enemy attacked again. And eventually it was by the same enemy's hand that your father and your brothers fell.

MICHAL

A never-ending cycle of human grief. You know, David, I didn't believe Samuel when he foretold that my father and three brothers would be killed in battle.

DAVID

There's no telling who would fall in war.

MICHAL

Samuel made it sound like their death was God's punishment for Father's so-called sins.

DAVID

I like to think that God is more merciful than that. But let's not talk about these somber matters now, Michal. Tell me about yourself. How have you fared in all these years?

MICHAL

I can't complain. Palti has been good to me. He's always there to help. We have been raising my sister Merav's five sons since she died. We also helped care for my brother Jonathan's son, Mephi. I don't know if you heard. Mephi is disabled and needs much care. He's lame in both his feet.

DAVID

I know.

MICHAL

He was injured while still little, when his nurse dropped him. She was fleeing with him upon hearing that Jonathan was slain.

DAVID

(Resumes walking and pulling MICHAL by the rope.)

Sounds like you've had a busy life, Michal. I, too, have raised children, boys and girls. Or, to put it more accurately, I let their mothers raise them. I'm just too busy being king.

MICHAL

It takes a mother and a father to do the job right. My sister's sons need Palti and me still, as does Jonathan's boy. You always had a kind and understanding heart, David. Please let me return to my home, where I can serve the ones who need me.

PALTI

(Stepping forward and speaking through his tears.)

Please - - your Majesty. Let Michal - - come home - - where she belongs. We love - - and need her. You have - - the kingdom - - and seven wives. What is - - Michal - - to you?

DAVID

(Enraged, stops, walks over to PALTI and faces him.)

Who are you to ask what Michal is to me? She is my property, for which I paid her father by striking down one hundred men. She is a symbol of the House of Saul so her presence in my palace will bolster my own status as king. But, above all, she is my wife. I will not give anyone the opportunity to question my manhood by pointing to the fact my wife has left me for another man. Now go home, Palti, and don't ever let me catch you near Michal again!

PALTI, still crying, walks over to MICHAL and hugs her, then turns around and walks in the direction from which he came. MICHAL watches PALTI walk away and bursts into tears. DAVID, still holding the rope, leads MICHAL on.

MICHAL

Dear Palti! He won't fare well without me.

DAVID

He's not at all what I expected. So weak. Quite different from the House of Saul.

MICHAL

That term brings forth such frightful memories!

DAVID

How so?

MICHAL

Losing my loved ones in that war was bad enough. But what happened in the aftermath was even worse. The enemy cut off Father's head.

DAVID

I know. I'd sought refuge from your father behind enemy lines, and heard them brag about it.

MICHAL

Had you fought side by side with my father and three brothers, you might have saved my loved ones' lives.

DAVID

The enemy had shown me kindness. Such action would betray their trust.

MICHAL

Had you not been a deserter, you might have led our people to a victory.

DAVID

Sometimes a man must consider his own survival.

MICHAL

They took my father's and my brothers' bodies and hung them for display on their city walls.

DAVID

I saw the four bodies there.

MICHAL

What a gruesome sight that must have been!

DAVID

I tried to get them to remove the bodies, but why would the enemy listen to me? I was the one who cut off Goliath's head and carried it away with me.

MICHAL

And to think how proud I was of you then!

DAVID

As I recall, that's when you fell in love with me!

The stage becomes dark. A moment later, center stage is illuminated and a young DAVID appears there. A young MICHAL walks over to him. He turns around and sees her. They hug and stand locked in an embrace throughout the following scene.

DAVID

Michal! How good to see you!

MICHAL

David, my love! How was my father today?

DAVID

He's become quite moody, as you know. This was a down day for him.

MICHAL

As too many of his days now are. Did he enjoy your song?

DAVID

He didn't say. He sat dejected, as if lost in thought. The King's been angry with me since I slew Goliath.

MICHAL

I think he was jealous that you became a national hero and your popularity surpassed his own.

DAVID

As you know, I didn't try to be popular. In fighting Goliath, all I wanted was to serve my King, my people and my God.

MICHAL

I know. But let's look on the bright side. At least Father has agreed to our being wed

DAVID

He had no choice since he publicly promised his daughter to whoever slew Goliath.

MICHAL

Luckily my sister, Merav, wanted to marry Adriel.

DAVID

Now your father has told me what he wants in lieu of a dowry.

MICHAL

What is it he wants?

DAVID

He wants me to slay a hundred of our enemy.

MICHAL

No!

DAVID

Yes. Single handedly.

MICHAL

Is that safe, David? For you to try to kill a hundred men?

DAVID

I love you more than anyone will ever know. I want you to be my wife.

MICHAL

Perhaps it's Father's way of trying to get you killed. His mind no longer works as it once did.

DAVID

I have to take the chance.

MICHAL

Oh, David. I couldn't bear to lose you. Promise you'll be careful! Promise you'll come back!

DAVID

God willing, I shall.

DAVID and MICHAL kiss for a long moment. The stage becomes dark. A moment later, a crowned, middle-aged DAVID appears upstage as before, pulling middle-aged MICHAL behind him.

MICHAL

How we change our view of things with age!

DAVID

And with experience. Eventually some people beholden to your father removed the four bodies from the walls and carted them away to give them proper burial.

MICHAL

Some day I will visit those sacred graves and pay my respects.

DAVID

I'd like to do it with you, dear Michal. Did anyone ever tell you that when your father and Jonathan fell, I wrote a song about them?

MICHAL

So while our people bled, you, David, poetized?

DAVID

It was about your loved ones that I wrote. Would you like to hear my song?

MICHAL

Ah, well.

DAVID

It was really a lament. I don't remember the exact words, but it went something like this:

Your beauty, O Israel, upon Your high places is slain!
How are the mighty fallen!
Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.
You mountains of Gilboa
let there be no dew nor rain upon you,
neither fields of choice fruits;
for there the shield of the mighty was vilely cast away,
the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.
From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan turned not back,
and the sword of Saul returned not empty.
Saul and Jonathan, the lovely and the pleasant in their lives,
even in their death they were not divided;
they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.
You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights,
who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel.
How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan upon Your high places is slain!
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
very pleasant have You been unto me;
wonderful was Your love to me, passing the love of women.
How are the mighty fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!

MICHAL

How moving! Do you still compose and sing and play the harp?

DAVID

I haven't for a long time. Preoccupation with affairs of state has dried me up.

MICHAL

It's sad when beauty gives way to the mundane!

DAVID and MICHAL reach the downstage area. The lights go out. In a moment or two, the barred room is illuminated and an aged MICHAL is there, pacing back and forth and occasionally looking out the window, as before. An aged DAVID enters the stage from stage left, with his crown on and naked from the waist up, as he was while dancing. He walks into the barred room through the door in back while MICHAL is looking out the window.

DAVID

(Proudly.)

Hey, Michal! Did you see me dancing?

MICHAL

(Turning around.)

Look at you, David! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

DAVID

What's wrong with dancing?

MICHAL

There's nothing wrong with dancing, but there's definitely something wrong with a king exposing himself in public in the street.

DAVID

I was dancing to celebrate God.

MICHAL

And to impress the ladies. You uncovered yourself in public in a most undignified way.

DAVID

What's wrong with a king displaying his virility?

MICHAL

(Pause.)

Oh, David, what became of that young man I once knew?

DAVID

(Pause.)

And what happened to my beloved Michal? You've become so cold I hardly know you.

MICHAL

If I'm cold, it's because I'm dead inside. My husband Palti died of loneliness and grief.

DAVID

I heard.

MICHAL

The only brother that remained to me after the others fell, my brother Ish, who took the throne right after Father fell, was murdered

DAVID

He was killed by two of his own lieutenants.

MICHAL

He only ruled two years.

DAVID

I put both murderers to death for their vile deed.

MICHAL

Merav's five sons, whom Palti and I raised as our own, were handed over to sworn enemies of Father's.

DAVID

I know.

MICHAL

Together with my two half-brothers, Father's sons by his concubine.

DAVID

I know.

MICHAL

All seven were put to death.

DAVID

I know.

MICHAL

(Pause.)

I heard you were the one to hand the seven over.

DAVID

(Pause.)

Sometimes good policy dictates we do what may seem wrong.

MICHAL

By doing so you added seven from the House of Saul to my father and four dead brothers. That makes twelve of my dear ones killed.

DAVID

(Pause.)

I spared Jonathan's boy, though, didn't I?

MICHAL

Poor Mephi! So disabled he couldn't even walk.

DAVID

In tribute to my dear friend Jonathan, I invited Mephi to live at the palace and be a permanent guest at my table.

MICHAL

I heard. But now Mephi, too, is dead.

DAVID

Yes.

MICHAL

I'm the sole survivor of King Saul's house.

DAVID takes MICHAL in his arms. She tries to resist but his grip on her is too firm.

DAVID

Let the dead rest in peace, dear Michal. You should rejoice in living.

MICHAL

It's hard to feel alive when death has struck me all around.

DAVID

Come back to me, Michal! I've missed you all these years.

MICHAL

The Michal you once loved has long been dead.

DAVID

I'll help you forget your wretched past, Michal.

MICHAL

You can't.

DAVID

(Trying to kiss MICHAL on the lips.)

Be a wife to me, Michal – not just my prisoner.

MICHAL

(Turning her face away to avoid his kiss.)

I can't.

DAVID

Be my lover – not just my queen, and I will give you life.

MICHAL

(Tears herself away from DAVID and falls on the mattress, sobbing.)

It's much too late for that.

DAVID

(Kneeling next to MICHAL on the floor and stroking her hair.)

My dear Michal. Let's begin all over. I love you as much now as I did when we were young.

DAVID again tries to kiss MICHAL on the lips. MICHAL turns her face away.

MICHAL

(Unresponsive, speaking to herself.)

Everything is dead. Only my father's long shadow still lives, hanging over me, even from the grave.

DAVID

(Getting up.)

As God rejected your father, so do I now reject you, Michal. For the rest of your life, you will stay here as my queen and my prisoner. But we will never see each other again.

DAVID walks out through the door in back of the barred room. The stage goes dark.

CURTAIN

SISERA'S MOTHER

A ten minute play

SISERA'S MOTHER

A four minute play

CHARACTERS

SISERA'S MOTHER	A middle-aged woman, mother of SISERA.
SISERA	Commander of Canaanite forces fighting Israel.
YAEL	A young woman, a wife, a Kenite.

TIME AND PLACE

The action takes place in ancient Israel, in the time of Deborah, the biblical judge and prophetess, who was the leader of her nation in its pre-monarchic period, over 3000 years ago. The play was inspired by chapters 4-5 of the Old Testament Book of Judges.

The stage is dark. Trumpets are audible in the distance. Amidst the sound of trumpets, men are shouting, crying. Neighing horses and thunder can be heard. Suddenly there is silence. Slowly, the stage is illuminated to reveal a small room at stage right and a tent at stage left. The room and the tent are independently illuminated. The ground around them is strewn with small branches and other debris, suggesting recent rain.

The room is defined by two stone walls, perpendicular to each other, forming the corner of a house, with one wall facing the audience and the other facing stage left. The wall facing the audience has a small window in it. Through the window, a bright interior is visible, suggesting opulence. SISERA'S MOTHER, richly attired and bejeweled, can be seen peering through the window. During the whole play, she occasionally approaches the window, peers out, then retreats into the interior of the room and comes back to peer through the window whenever she speaks.

The tent is rectangular, with its long side parallel to stage front and its entrance, a slit in the tent-wall, facing mid-stage. The tent has the sidewall closest to the audience raised, so as to reveal the tent's interior. The tent is sparsely furnished with a blanket-covered mattress on the floor and a small stool near the entrance. In the interior of the tent, there is a small open shelf cabinet on which some food containers and dishes can be seen. A rope is strung in the upstage left corner of the tent.

YAEL is seated on the stool inside the tent, brushing her hair while looking in a hand-held mirror. She is lavishly dressed, her clothing contrasting with her plain surroundings.

YAEL

(To the audience.)

The sounds of war are deafening. I hope Heber, my husband, is safe. We Kenites have always stood for peace. We are simple people, nomads, pitching our tent where we can make a living. We have no stake in this war. We are descendants of Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, and therefore related to the Israelites, in whose territory our tent is now pitched. But we are also related to the Canaanites, amongst whom we have dwelled for generations. We recently concluded an official peace treaty with King Yabin, so the Canaanites can be assured of our neutrality. This war between the Israelites and the Canaanites is bad for us. Simply put, war is bad for business. I can understand why the Israelite prophetess, Deborah, declared war on the Canaanites and called her nation to arms. Twenty years of oppression were more than any people could endure. But personally, I despise war. Why can't people simply get along?

SISERA enters from upstage. He is wearing military garb bearing insignia indicating high command, but he is disheveled, his pants ripped, his boots muddy. He is bareheaded. His clothes and hair are wet, indicating he has been caught in a downpour. As he enters, he looks over his shoulders, seemingly concerned about being pursued, stumbles this way and that, obviously exhausted, then, spotting the tent at stage left, he makes his way toward it with great effort, breathing heavily, and peers through its entrance. YAEL notices SISERA peering into the tent. For a moment, she appears frightened, but then she rises, places her brush and mirror on the stool, and walks self-assuredly toward the tent entrance.

YAEL

(Parting the door-slit and looking through it.)

Who are you?

SISERA

(Looking this way and that over his shoulders.)

Is this not - - the tent of - - Heber the Kenite?

YAEL

It is. I'm his wife.

SISERA

I need to - - speak to him.

YAEL

He's out on business.

SISERA

Please - - let me in.

YAEL

I can't. It's against the custom of our people for a wife to let a strange man in when she's alone.

SISERA

It's urgent - - that you make an exception - - in my case.

YAEL

Who are you?

SISERA

I'm King Yabin's - - soldier - - and - - as I'm sure you know - - the Kenites have - - concluded - - a treaty of peace - - with the Canaanites' King.

YAEL

To ensure we stay loyal and avoid repeating past infidelities, I know.

SISERA

Perhaps. - - But I'm not here to look - - into these matters. - - There's a more pressing matter - - right here at hand.

YAEL

(Looking closely at the insignia on SISERA'S uniform.)

Are you by chance Sisera, commander of Canaanite forces? Your uniform…

SISERA

I'm not free to say. - - Let's just say I'm an ally of the Kenites - - Please let me in. - - I've run a long way. - - I'm being pursued…

YAEL

You must be Sisera. And I notice the sound of war has stopped. No trumpets, no men crying out, not even horses neighing.

SISERA'S MOTHER

(Looking out the window.)

Where is my son? Why is Sisera's chariot delayed?

SISERA

I'm thirsty - - and tired - -

YAEL

But who's pursuing you? Barak, commander of Israel's forces? From your looks it seems the Canaanites have lost the war.

SISERA

I'll explain - - after I've had some rest. - - Please feel compassion - - for a tired ally - - for a thirsty friend - - You'll make your husband - - proud.

YAEL

(Hesitates, then opens the door-slit to let SISERA in.)

Come in! Welcome!

SISERA

(Entering, then stumbling and falling to the floor.)

If anyone asks, - - please deny - - there's any stranger here.

YAEL

You can count on me. We Kenites obey the rules of hospitality.

SISERA'S MOTHER

Why are the hooves of his horses silent?

SISERA

Water - - please.

YAEL

(Goes to the cabinet and pours some milk into a bowl.)

I have some milk for you. It's better than plain water.

YAEL kneels next to SISERA and holds the bowl of milk to his lips. SISERA drinks.

SISERA

Thank you - - for your hospitality. - - What is your name?

YAEL

"Yael."

SISERA

"Yael"?

YAEL

It means "wild goat."

SISERA

Thank you, - - Yael.

YAEL

You must be hungry. I made some fresh curd this morning. I'll get you some.

SISERA

Thank you, - - Yael.

SISERA'S MOTHER

From the sound of it, the fighting's over. So what's keeping him away?

YAEL gets up and walks over to the cabinet, where she spoons some curd into the milk bowl, then walks over to SISERA and, holding the bowl with one hand, spoons the curd into SISERA'S mouth.

YAEL

You must have been quite hungry to down the curd so fast.

SISERA

I was. - - Thank you, Yael, - - for your hospitality. - - And now I'm tired. - - I want to go to sleep.

SISERA tries to lie down on the floor.

YAEL

Wait. Why don't you lie down on the mattress? It's much more comfortable than the floor. I'll cover you with the blanket and you can have a good, long rest.

YAEL gets up, puts the bowl on top of the cabinet, then walks back to SISERA and helps him up onto his feet. He seems limp as she guides him to the mattress, removes the blanket, helps him lie down and covers him with the blanket so that only his head is visible.

SISERA

Thank you, - - Yael.

SISERA'S MOTHER

He's always so punctual.

YAEL

You're trembling.

SISERA

I'm - - cold.

YAEL

Perhaps your wet clothes are making you cold.

SISERA

It was pouring rain. - - The chariots proved - - useless in the mud.

YAEL

I'll take your clothes off and hang them up to dry.

SISERA

Nine hundred chariots - - all stuck - - I had to abandon mine - - and run here - - through a sea of mud.

YAEL removes the blanket, takes SISERA'S boots and socks off, then undresses him and covers him with the blanket again so that only his head is visible. She gets up and hangs his clothes on the rope which is strung in the far stage left corner of the tent, and places his boots nearby. She returns to SISERA.

YAEL

How does that feel?

SISERA'S MOTHER

I wonder if something has happened to him.

SISERA

Better, - - but I'm - - still cold.

YAEL

I see you're shivering. I can warm you up.

SISERA

Thank you, - - Yael.

YAEL

I'll lie down next to you so the warmth of my body will warm up yours.

SISERA

How kind you are, - - Yael!

SISERA'S MOTHER

Maybe he's been wounded.

YAEL lies down next to SISERA under the blanket. After a moment, the tent goes dark and SISERA can be heard snoring. Slowly, the tent is illuminated again but now only dimly. YAEL rises, careful not to disturb SISERA, and recovers him, this time including his head, with the blanket. She then walks quietly in the tent toward stage left, where she picks up a tent peg and a mallet from the ground. SISERA is still snoring. Holding the peg in her left hand and the mallet in her right, she quietly walks back to the mattress, holds the peg over the bulge in the blanket which indicates SISERA'S head, and pounds the peg into it with one strike of the mallet. SISERA stops snoring, and makes a gurgling sound. Then all is quiet in the tent. The tent grows dark.

SISERA'S MOTHER

Maybe he's been killed. No, nothing could have happened to my son. He's been in many battles and he's always returned to me. Such a brave man, commanding nine hundred chariots against Israel's foot soldiers. The balance of power alone would weigh in favor of Sisera. I mustn't let myself worry. That's what he always tells me. Such a sweet, kind boy. So good to his mother. And what's more important in a man than how he treats his own mother? When all is said and done, it's more important than all the battles won and all the cheering of the crowds. I must do as he says and not worry. He's probably won the battle by now and is dividing the spoils among his men. Spoils of dyed garments and of embroideries for the necks of his brave soldiers. And for each man, an Israelite maiden or two to do with as he pleases…

YAEL

(Emerges from the tent and runs upstage.)

Barak! Deborah! I killed your enemy! I killed Sisera!

YAEL exits. The lights on stage go out, with the exception of the room, which remains illuminated. SISERA'S MOTHER is seen silently peering out the room's window.

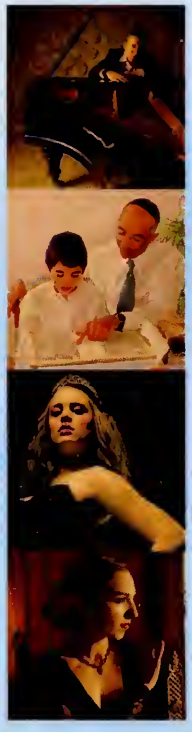
CURTAIN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Israel (then called "Palestine"), Judith Weinshall Liberman came to the United States in 1947 to pursue higher education after completing the Reali School in Haifa. She earned four American university degrees, including a J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School and an LL.M. from the University of Michigan Law School. Having settled in the Boston area in 1956, she studied art and creative writing, including playwriting. Although she spent most of her adult life creating visual art and is best known for her artworks about the Holocaust, she did, over the years, take time out to write and had four books published. She wrote her first play while attending college in America in the late 1940s. During the ensuing decades, other plays followed. LOOKING BACK is the author's first published collection of plays. Her play GOOD OLD ABRAHAM, which is included in this collection, was performed by the Shades Repertory Theater under the direction of Mr. Samuel Harps, Artistic Director, at the historic Central Presbyterian Church in Haverstraw, New York, in April 2010. Ms. Liberman's archives can be found at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art and at the Boston Public Library.

DRAMA

Born in Haifa, Israel (then called "Palestine"), **Judith Weinshall Liberman** came to the U.S. in 1947 to pursue higher education. She earned four American university degrees, including a J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School and an LL.M. from the University of Michigan Law School. After settling in the Boston area in 1956, she studied art and creative writing. Although she spent most of her adult life creating visual art and is best known for her artworks about the Holocaust, she did, over the years, take time out to write and had four books published. She wrote her first play while in college in the late 1940s. During the ensuing decades, other plays followed. LOOKING BACK is the author's first published collection of plays. Ms. Liberman's archives can be found at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art and at the Boston Public Library.



The four plays in this collection were all written after Judith Weinshall Liberman reached her eighties. One play, EMPATHY, was inspired by a period in the playwright's life, when her husband, then only 52, suffered a stroke which rendered him unable to play the piano and led to his severe depression. The other three plays – GOOD OLD ABRAHAM, MICHAL and SISERA'S MOTHER – were inspired by Old Testament stories which the playwright studied in elementary school in her native Israel but upon which she bestows, in her plays, a mature perspective that raises questions relevant to our times.

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